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Autobiography as Myth of Origin

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For my mother, who taught me to make my mind large, so that there was room for paradoxes.

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Declaration

Early versions of almost all of the chapters have been presented to either the Women's Studies PhD research forum, or the Feminist Philosophy Society. I am very grateful to everyone who attended for their criticism and comments.

Parts of the introduction, Chapter Five and Chapter Seven have gone into a paper titled 'Lesbian autobiography and myths of origin', presented to the Auto/Biography Study Groups annual conference in July 1999, Southampton.

An earlier version of Chapter Seven was given under the title 'The Rewriting of Home: Autobiographies by Daughters of Immigrants' at the annual Women's Studies Network conference at the University of Warwick, July 1999. I have given an expanded version of this paper for the Seminars on Gender series at Birmingham University.

A revised edition of this paper will be published in a special issue of 'Women's Studies International forum' dedicated to papers given at the Warwick conference (forthcoming, Autumn 2001).

I have not submitted this thesis for a degree at any other university.

Abstract

The following PhD thesis will explore the connection between autobiography and myth of origin: On the one hand, I am concerned with the ways in which women autobiographers rewrite classical myths of origin; on the other hand, I contend that autobiography itself is a myth of origin, a recreation of the forces that created the narrator.

Throughout this thesis, I will develop two main themes: the first is the use of myth as a framework for autobiographical writing. This is possible because of myth's characteristic double focus on the universal *and* on the particular version, the historical context. Myth allows feminist autobiographers to connect themselves to universal truths from which they are barred by patriarchal tradition and to carve out their own, highly personal version.

The second theme is that the autobiographers depict the origin as the core of the self *and* utterly Other. First, the narrator has to rely on the stories of other people, or a 'family memory'. Second, the past can be seen as connected to or leaving traces in the present; at the same time, it can be completely Other and incomprehensible. Third, the autobiographical I is often cut off from her origins, and a constructive return that integrates the past and the present self is only possible through a deliberate act of mythmaking: It is mythmaking and storytelling that provides a connection between self and Other.

I hope to make a contribution to feminist theory of autobiography as well as to feminist theory. Reading autobiography as myth of origin approaches the persistent problem of the relationship between the historical author and the autobiographical self. Moreover, I will explore the specific relation between women and origins, and address the necessity for feminist theory to develop a framework where self and Other are intimately connected.

How did we become the way we are today?¹
(Christa Wolf)

Chapter One

‘Enter the Dragon’: Introduction

An autobiography is, among other things, an exploration of the autobiographer’s origins. It seeks to answer Christa Wolf’s question: How did we become the way we are today? In the following exploration of autobiography as myth of origin I will focus on the ways in which women writers have used their autobiographies to engage in mythmaking. The connection between myth and autobiography will be an Ariadne’s thread to guide us through a set of issues that are, in my opinion, crucial to a study of women’s autobiography: psychoanalysis and narrative, discourses of embodiment, (first) memory, utopia and nostalgia, past and present, home and diaspora. While several authors have briefly remarked on the close relationship between (origin) myth and autobiography,² no one has, to my knowledge, yet

¹ Christa Wolf (1976 [1986]) *Kindheitsmuster: Roman*. [Patterns of Childhood: A Novel.] Darmstadt: Luchterhand, p. 196, my translation. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *Kindheitsmuster*. I have chosen to translate from the original instead of using the English translation (Christa Wolf [1983] *A Model Childhood*. Translated by Ursule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt. London: Virago) because it tends to gloss over the subtle nuances of Wolf’s theoretical exploration of selfhood and memory that are especially important within this project.

² See, for example, Suzette Henke (1998) *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, and Catherine Lappas (1994) “‘The Way I Heard It Was ...’: Myth, Memory and Autobiography in *Storyteller* and *The Woman*

followed through on this and explored the diverse ways in which myths of origin are used within women writers' autobiographies. I believe that this viewpoint provides me with new and fruitful ways of looking at autobiography.

Engaging with a diverse set of issues necessitates an interdisciplinary project. I use myth and autobiography as points of connection that link issues prevalent in what are diverse areas of study: for example, memory is explored with ideas from the disciplines of psychology, philosophy and sociology. I can not pretend to have a comprehensive knowledge of every field touched on within this thesis. However, since autobiography links these areas, an attempt to draw out their interconnectedness has to be made. Thus it might become possible to gain insights into both autobiographical writing, and into the discourses of, for example, memory, narrative or embodiment.

In what follows, there are two main strands. The first is how myth can be used as a framework for autobiographical writing.³ I will argue that this is possible because of myth's characteristic double focus on the universal, on truths that transcend time and space, and the particular version that incorporates the historical context and the personal story. It enables women autobiographers to

Warrior.' In: *CEA-Critic: Official Journal of the College English Association* 57:1, Fall 1994, pp. 57-67.

³ I am using myth here to mean two different things: on the one hand, stories taken from (or featuring characters from) ancient myth; on the other hand, as many kinds of stories that recreate the origins that created the narrator. For this, I am drawing on Judith Mitchell's definition of myths as 'stories ... to explain other stories.' Juliet Mitchell (1984) *Women:*

connect themselves to the universal while creating their own, personal, version of the myth. This might explain why feminist autobiographers are drawn to using stories or characters from myth to rework the story of their own origins and growth: through myth, they can connect themselves to universal truths from which they are barred by patriarchal tradition, *and* they can carve out their own, highly personal version. This is especially true for lesbian autobiographers: since the popular discourse on homosexuality is obsessed with the origins of what is perceived to be an aberration (genetic? psychological? hormonal? Or a combination of the three?), they develop a counter-story of becoming a lesbian. They trace back their lesbianism to a strong and loving relationship to the mother, and further back to a matrilineal heritage. I will explore how myth is used to form connections between isolated autobiographers and imagined communities, mothers and daughters, and the place of origin and the diaspora. Moreover, because mythical time is outside historical time, it can be linked to the individual's childhood. Myth enables the autobiographer to return to her own childhood, the mythical age, a matrilineal heritage, and at the same time move forwards, to connect to a different, utopian future.

The second major strand is that, within autobiographical writing, the origin is the core of the self, and at the same time utterly Other. There are several forms this can take. First, because the autobiographer cannot remember her own birth and early childhood, the 'whole story' can only be written if the narrator relies on the stories of other people, or a more general family memory. Second, the past (and the past self) can be seen as connected to or leaving traces in the present; at the same time, it can be completely Other and incomprehensible. Third, the autobiographical I is often cut off from her origins. Once the gap between present and past becomes too great, the narrative cannot bridge it but doubles back on itself, creating a ghostly self that did or could not leave the past. A constructive return that integrates the past and the present self is only possible through a deliberate act of mythmaking. As before, it is mythmaking and storytelling that provides a connection, however tenuous, between self and Other.

Employing the interdisciplinary approach as outlined above, I hope to make a contribution to feminist theory of autobiography, as well as general feminist theory. Reading autobiography as myth of origin addresses some persistent problems for feminist autobiography criticism, especially that of the relation between the historical author and the textual autobiographical selves.

Moreover, this thesis bears upon a more general issue within feminist theory: that of the specific relation between women and origins. I am going to argue that looking at the origins of the female autobiographical self helps develop a

model of self and Other where they are deeply embroiled, not opposed to each other.

But first, in order to explain how I got to where I am today, I would like to begin with a brief autobiographical narrative of my own discovery of the topics of autobiography and mythmaking. Whilst I have been fascinated with myths and fairy tales for as long as I can remember, I can trace the immediate roots of this project back to listening to an interview with Jodie Foster about the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). There, she argued that the point of the film was not that women could shoot guns and kill people as well as men could, but that in this case the hero who went out into the wood and fought the dragon was a woman; and it was important to her that a woman could be cast in this archetypal role. When I began an MA course in Women's Studies at Warwick, I explored this idea in an essay on the complex narratives of female action heroes in Hollywood cinema. The MA dissertation that followed, on autobiographies as strategies of feminist mythmaking, was concerned with the myth of the hero: I argued that not only did women autobiographers use versions of classical myths and fairy tales to tell stories of a girl's origins and growth, but that autobiography, like its cousin, the *Bildungsroman*, was very much modelled on the myth of the hero, narrating the rites of passage undergone by him or her. Thus, women writers could make themselves into the heroes of their own autobiographies. In doing so, they could upset the

androcentric bias of traditional myths and fairy tales and create their own, often irreverent, version of an old story. In this thesis, I am further developing one of the arguments set out in the MA thesis: that there is a close connection between myth and autobiography. On the other hand, I shall take this argument into a new direction by focusing on the relationship between autobiography and myth of origin. It will be argued that not only do autobiographers use myth to narrate the story of their own origin, but that autobiography is in itself a kind of myth of origin: a recreation of the forces that created the narrator.

My discussion of this relationship between autobiography and myth of origin will branch out in two directions. On the one hand, I will trace the manifold uses of mythical figures and stories in the origin stories the autobiographers tell. On the other hand, this will lead me into a more general consideration of origin stories in autobiography, considering the impacts of location, memory and the experience of female embodiment on the origin stories that are told within the autobiographies.

The list of eight autobiographers whose writings are used in this thesis is admittedly eclectic (and, during the process of writing, I have often been asked why I chose these authors), but I believe that both the straightforwardly ‘mythmaking’ autobiographers (Maxine Hong Kingston, Audre Lorde, and H. D.) and those pondering the importance of origins and origin stories (Virginia Woolf, Christa Wolf, Maureen Duffy, Eva Hoffman and Dorothy Allison)

contribute important elements to my topic of autobiography as myth of origin. Some will be looked at in more detail than others: for example, H. D., because she provides me with an inroad to the use of myths within psychoanalysis, will be the only author to have a whole chapter to herself. The autobiographies will not be discussed as literary examples of a genre; what interests me here are the uses of autobiography made by the writers in order to engage with issues such as time, memory, or diaspora. In the following, I will give a brief sketch of the contents of the texts, and try to situate them between 'autobiography', 'autobiographical fiction' and 'fiction'.

The positioning of autobiography between 'fact' and 'fiction' has always been a thorny question. In *The Autobiographical Pact*, Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a text in which author and narrator are the same, and their identical name is that of a real person. This identical name activates a pact between author and reader: the reader agrees to read a text as an autobiography and can now hold the author to a requirement to tell the truth, or to be sincere.⁴ Lejeune's is a dynamic definition: autobiography is characterised not by the conventions of a genre, but by the flexible contract between author and reader. However, according to Leigh Gilmore, the roots of autobiography in the much older confession narrative defines autobiography as 'a form in which it is both

possible and necessary to tell the truth.’⁵ Gilmore argues that who can tell the truth is not determined by the story told, but by the teller’s position in society. Thus, women writers, and especially minority women writers whose stories do not count as ‘truth’, have used autobiography as a means of experimenting with different names and selves, thereby upsetting the discourses of truth and subjectivity that govern autobiography. For her, it is the autobiographical ‘fiction’ where the name of author and protagonist are not identical, and the experimental ‘biomythographies’ that offer the most interesting insights for a feminist theory of autobiography. Most of the autobiographies discussed here would fall into Gilmore’s category of the ‘limit cases’ of autobiography,⁶ which are situated on the borderlines between fact and fiction because their authors refuse to sign the autobiographical pact that ties them to limiting concepts of truthfulness. In *That’s How it Was*, for example, Maureen Duffy calls her narrator ‘Paddy’, which is not so much a name as a description of her father’s origins. In spite of these complexities, I will follow what has become established practice and use the concept of the tripartite self of autobiography: that of the historical author (‘Virginia Woolf’) and then the autobiographical self or ‘I’ that is divided into the protagonist whose life is described and the

⁴ See Philippe Lejeune (1989) ‘The Autobiographical Pact.’ In: *On Autobiography*. Edited by John Eakin and translated by Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3-30.

⁵ Leigh Gilmore (1994) *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 121.

⁶ Leigh Gilmore (2000) ‘Limit-Cases, Trauma, and Self-Representation.’ Unpublished conference paper, ‘Auto/Biography and Changing Identities,’ University of British Columbia, July 2000.

narrator who tells the life stories and who sometimes also relates the process of writing an autobiography with all its difficulties and rewards.

The voice of the narrator is very dominant in Virginia Woolf's *A Sketch of the Past*,⁷ a series of autobiographical sketches in form of a diary (entries run from 18th April 1939 to November 17th 1940, telling of events that happened during her childhood and adolescence, from the first memories to about 1900). Woolf connects reminiscences of the past with events in the present, leaving the present 'as a platform to stand upon' (p. 75) in order to show the conditions that make it possible for the narrator to remember past events in the way she does. In order to make the process of autobiographical writing visible to the reader, the character of a work-in-progress is retained. *A Sketch of the Past* survived as a manuscript in different stages of completion, and was posthumously published, though 'clearly intended for publication.'⁸ However, it has been read as a revelation of the author's most intimate self: 'It was only in the "Sketch of the Past" ... that she began to speak openly about her own sexual history: and even then still hesitatingly, darkly.'⁹

⁷ Virginia Woolf (1976) 'A Sketch of the Past.' In: *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*. Edited by Jeanne Schulkind. London: Sussex University Press, pp. 61-138. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *A Sketch of the Past*.

⁸ Hermione Lee (1996 [1997]) *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage, p. 18. For a description of the manuscript's form, see J. Schulkind's 'Editor's Note' in *Moments of Being*, p. 61-3.

⁹ Hermione Lee (1996 [1997]) *Virginia Woolf*, p. 18.

H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, in contrast, is a very public text, a description of a series of therapeutic talks (but not an analysis proper) with Sigmund Freud.¹⁰ It is ostentatiously reverential to the Great Man, and Ernest Jones described it as 'the most enchanting ornament of all the Freudian biographical literature.'¹¹ However, it is at times very critical of Freud, pointing out the androcentric bias in his thinking. In *Tribute to Freud*, H. D. recreates the 'free association' method of psychoanalysis, linking recreations of conversations with Freud to stories of childhood memories brought to light during the sessions: 'Let the impressions come in their own way, make their own sequence.' (p. 14) These impressions, in themselves, can be ambivalent and contradictory. Moreover, the book in its final form comprises two versions: the first, 'Writing on the Wall', '... was written in London in the autumn of 1944, with no reference to the Vienna notebooks of spring 1933 ... [and] appeared in *Life & Letters Today*, London 1945-46. "Advent" ... was taken direct from the old notebooks of 1933, though it was not assembled until December 1948, Lausanne.'¹² The book as a whole stages the clashing of a reverential public tribute that ends with an optimistic interpretation of Goethe's 'Mignon's Song' that likens Freud to the father who takes his daughter 'home' to Italy, with the much darker, more private 'notebooks' that are marked by the date entries as part of a

¹⁰ H. D. (1956 [1985]) *Tribute to Freud*. Manchester: Carcanet. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *Tribute to Freud*.

¹¹ Ernest Jones, quoted in Norman H. Pearson, 'Foreword', in *Tribute to Freud*, p. vi.

¹² H. D., 'Author's Note', in *Tribute to Freud*, p. xiv.

diary and end with a nightmare, where the narrator asks herself, '*are we all dead?*' (p. 187)

H. D.'s *The Gift* depicts scenes from the narrator's childhood in a similarly associative manner, focusing on the inheritance of creativity and spirituality passed on to her by her mother and her maternal ancestors, who were members of the Moravian Brotherhood.¹³ In the last chapter, childhood memories are intercut with the narrator's experience of a German air raid, and the memories and Moravian chants and rituals are used as a talisman against fear and death.

Maureen Duffy's *That's How It Was* tells the story of 'Paddy', a working-class girl who manages to escape the limited options of marriage or the mill by becoming a scholarship girl.¹⁴ This journey is strewn with dangers (being mired by her stepfamily's disinterest in learning, not to 'pass' for a scholarship, to 'fall' by becoming pregnant) and it is only her mother's constant encouragement that keeps her going. However, the novel does not end with a triumphant achievement or homecoming, in the manner of the *Bildungsroman*, but with her mother's death. This death forms the ending and is at the same

¹³ H. D. (1969 [1984]) *The Gift*. London: Virago. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *The Gift*.

¹⁴ Maureen Duffy (1962 [1983]) *That's How It Was*. London: Virago. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *That's How it Was*.

For a discussion of the typical narrative of the working-class girl becoming a 'scholarship girl', see Carolyn Steedman (1997) 'Writing the Self: The End of the Scholarship Girl.' In: Jim McGuigan, ed. *Cultural Methodologies*. London: Sage, pp. 106-125.

time the source of the narrative: it fills Paddy with an urge to remember her mother and her own childhood. By remembering, she also tries to understand herself and decide what to do with her future: 'that's how it was, that's just how it was. And what the hell do I do now?' (p. 221) In her 1982 foreword to the book, Maureen Duffy proclaims that it is 'a novel rather than an autobiography because of its structuring towards this end' (p. vi), 'its vividness and intensity ... a deliberate exercise of style' (p. x); the writing 'a deliberate exercise in craftsmanship, a flexing of professional muscles.' (p. xi) On the other hand, Duffy insists that she used her own life as material for the book: 'I wanted to celebrate my mother but I also wanted to show how a ... relationship that in the world's eyes [was] brave and fine could produce a psychological result which, also in the world's eyes ... could be labelled sick or perverted (p. vi)'. In other words, *That's How it Was* is, among other things, a story of the origins of lesbianism: Duffy uses a highly personal story in order to make a political point.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is about growing up as the daughter of Chinese immigrants in California;¹⁵ however, it is a decidedly non-linear text. Her 'memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts' (as the subtitle reads) is a rich and intricate web of stories and stories within stories, alternating between various voices and time-frames. The protagonist shuttles back and

forth between different ages of girlhood, and the narrator's voice is situated at different points in time: at the time of leaving home in order to escape her parents' confusing messages *and* after the temporary return home that helps her to reclaim the past and her Chinese heritage. Then, there is a 'magical' time which the protagonist can inhabit by identifying with the characters in old stories, especially that of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan who is the hero of a classical Chinese ballad. There has been an ongoing debate about whether *The Woman Warrior* is a work of fiction or non-fiction.¹⁶ However, Kingston's work shows that the politics of the autobiographical pact become more complex when situated within a culture where every person has several names: a Chinese name, a family name like 'Older Sister', a Western name like 'Maxine', a nickname like 'Little Dog' and a 'real' name that has to be guarded, because others who know this real name have power over the person named (p. 13). In the book itself, the protagonist's name is never mentioned, the only clue provided is that it sounds like 'Ink' in Chinese and thus 'names' her as a writer: "'Ink!' Moon Orchid called out, and, sure enough, a girl smeared with ink said 'Yes?'" (p. 121)

¹⁵ Maxine Hong Kingston (1976 [1981]) *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts*. London: Picador. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *The Woman Warrior*.

¹⁶ See Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1991) 'Introduction.' In: *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's 'The Woman Warrior.'* New York: MLA, pp. 21-22.

Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* is (in the West German edition) subtitled 'A Novel', and a very peculiar 'Author's Note at the beginning of the book states that

All the characters in the book are the author's invention. None of them is identical with a person living or dead. Likewise, none of the episodes described correspond to real events. Readers who believe that they can detect resemblances between a character in the novel and themselves or people they know should be reminded of the peculiar lack of singularity found in the behaviour of many contemporaries. One should then blame the circumstances for creating patterns of behaviour that one can recognise.

(*Kindheitsmuster*, no page)

This is a twofold denial of the traditional markers of autobiography, first of the resemblance between life and text, and second of the autobiographical I's singularity. However, this preface is also an ironical variation on the usual formula 'resemblance to all persons living or dead is purely coincidental'. It is precisely the resemblance between the portrayed characters and most contemporaries (especially in the tendency to avoid uncomfortable truths) that the reader is encouraged to recognise.¹⁷ On the other hand, characters in *Kindheitsmuster* are very similar to those in more straightforwardly autobiographical pieces: for example, the fictional daughter Lenka is

¹⁷ Tonya Blowers argues that this kind of disclaimer does not separate 'fact' from 'fiction', but shows that 'author and protagonist are embroiled in more complex ways.' (Tonya Blowers (1998) 'Locating the Self: Re-reading Autobiography as Theory and Practice.' PhD thesis, University of Warwick, p. 72).

recognisable as the author's younger daughter 'Tinka'. Wolf herself states that the material in *Kindheitsmuster* 'is autobiographical in a manner of speaking ... this "in a manner of speaking" [is] important, because there is no absolute identity.'¹⁸ The name Wolf gives her autobiographical I, 'Nelly Jordan', is, again, more a designation of a place than a personal name. It places her on the 'rift that goes through time' (p. 9), for Jordan is one of the archetypal borderline rivers, and in German 'over the Jordan' is also a colloquial euphemism for 'dead'.

The plot of *Kindheitsmuster* stages a move 'backwards' into the past on a temporal and a geographical level. The narrator, her husband, brother and daughter travel to Poland to visit the small town where she grew up (which was, then, part of Germany), and the narrator tries to remember and understand events of her childhood, and comprehend how she could have become an ardent member of the Hitler Youth. Stories from the narrator's childhood are interwoven with the events of the journey to Poland and back; and on another time level again, the narrator reflects on the difficulties of her autobiographical project at the moment of writing. The narrator's quest becomes overburdened by the haunting sense that if only she could understand herself as a child, she

¹⁸ Christa Wolf (1987) *Die Dimension des Autors*. [The Dimension of the Writer.] Darmstadt: Luchterhand, p. 8-9. Critics have argued that Wolf endeavours to liberate autobiography from its generic constraints, to 'free autobiography from its traditionally authoritative narrative patterns.' Neil Jackson and Barbara Saunders (1980) 'Christa Wolf's

could understand the collective psyche of the whole of Germany and the origins of the Third Reich. This means that the more she attempts to get hold of her childhood self, the wider the gap between her present and her childhood self becomes. In the end, she acknowledges an impossibility: 'The child that has lived in me, crouched deep down, did it come out? Or did it, once flushed out, only find a deeper, more impenetrable hiding- place? ... I don't know. At night I shall abandon myself to the experience of dreams, and I shall cease to rebel against the limits of what can be expressed in words.' (p. 377/8)

Audre Lorde's *Zami*¹⁹ is, according to the author, a 'biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and the history of myth. In other words, it is fiction built from many sources.'²⁰ Thus, the ongoing narrative of the narrator's childhood, adolescence, first loves and relationships, jobs and travels are interspersed with poetic interludes, sometimes but not always written in italics. These record dreams and insights, and sometimes the commentary of the narrator coming to a new understanding of her past. The narrator traces back the roots of her twofold love for women and words, explaining explicitly 'how I became a poet' (p. 21) and, implicitly, 'how I became a lesbian'. Both loves are connected to the narrator's strong and

Kindheitsmuster: An East German Experiment in Political Autobiography.' In: *German Life and Letters*, 33, pp. 319-29.

¹⁹ Audre Lorde (1982 [1996]) *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. London: Pandora. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *Zami*.

²⁰ Claudia Tate (1983) 'Interview with Audre Lorde.' In: *Black Women Writers at Work*. Harpenden: Oldcastle, pp. 100-116; p. 115.

ambivalent relationship with her mother, and, further, to her mother's ancestresses who lived on the Caribbean island of Carriacou. Together with the narrator's present and past friends and lovers, they build the community of *zami*, 'a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers' (p. 223). The loving community of the women of Carriacou serves both as utopian, mythical origin and as model for a possible future.

Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* describes the process of learning to live in a new language.²¹ The protagonist, a daughter of Jewish parents who grows up in Cracow, has to leave when her parents decide to emigrate to Canada. This loss of her home and mother tongue is experienced as a traumatic split: The section on her childhood is appropriately titled 'Paradise', the section on being an immigrant in Vancouver is titled 'Exile', and the section on studying and living in America, slowly developing a new self in a new language is called 'The New Place'. It is mainly the enforced bilinguality that causes a split in the protagonist's self: during the 'Exile' section, she is in a constant dialogue with a 'more real', Polish-speaking self that upbraids her for her spineless acceptance of American values and reminds her of how she would have thought or acted had she remained in Poland. The narrator's relation to the past is admittedly tinged with nostalgia; however, she must hang on to the intense

²¹ Eva Hoffman (1989 [1991]) *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*. London: Minerva. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *Lost in Translation*.

emotions of childhood without being caught in a paralysing nostalgia that threatens to turn her, like the gaze of the Medusa, into stone.

Finally, Dorothy Allison's collection of essays and autobiographical stories, *Skin*,²² and her autobiographical novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*,²³ both tell the story of the narrator's progress from abject poverty (her family are the 'undeserving poor', the men always drunk and never able to hold on to a job, the women invariably pregnant at fifteen) to scholarship student and, finally, vocal lesbian writer and campaigner. With the odds against her, this progress is made possible only by her mother's unwavering support and her own stubborn will. The two books also tell the story of her slow recovery from a history of being beaten and sexually abused by her stepfather. The narrator's progress is defined by a series of geographical moves forward: in Carolina, she is empowered by several stubborn and worldly-wise aunts, but not given a chance by the educational system, because her family is pigeonholed as 'white trash'. When her family moves to California, society is much less stratified and pupils are categorised by intelligence and not by the social standing of their families; however, she loses the support of the extended family and is at the mercy of her abusive stepfather. *Bastard Out of Carolina* ends when the protagonist is fourteen and is left by her mother in the care of her lesbian aunt. *Skin* narrates

²² Dorothy Allison (1994 [1995]) *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature*. London: Pandora. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *Skin*.

²³ Dorothy Allison (1992 [1993]) *Bastard Out of Carolina*. London: Flamingo. All subsequent reference will be shown in the text as *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

the next move to dangerous and fascinating New York, where the narrator becomes a lesbian activist. Some of the essays in *Skin* describe Allison's reclaiming her origins in writing stories and an autobiographical novel. She is striving to be able to 'craft truth out of storytelling' (*Skin*, p. 55), fusing her own and other people's stories into a powerful narrative.

As I hope to have shown above, all eight autobiographical texts are situated on the borderlines of autobiography. They breach the divide between diary and autobiography, or autobiography and novel. Moreover, they all create a self that is complex and fragmented. The modernist authors Virginia Woolf and H. D. represent the beginnings of a new kind of autobiographical writing: Susanna Egan has traced 'the beginnings of frequent experiment with self-representation to the beginnings of modernism.'²⁴ However, for Woolf and H. D., as for Wolf, Lorde, Kingston, Hoffman, Duffy and Allison, the fragmentation of self is not only consequent on the modern human condition, but also the mark of a personal experience of a traumatic split: the loss of the mother tongue, the loss of home, the death of the mother, a situation of diaspora, the experience of sexual abuse, all of which exacerbate this fragmentation of self. Since this split within the self is also a split from her origins, creating a new (though always complex and fragmented) self means

²⁴ Susanna Egan (1999) *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p. 29.

reclaiming and recreating one's origins: an act of mythmaking that creates, for example, a China that is home to women warriors, ghosts and dragons, a Cracow where people live to the full under the most constricting circumstances. However, these recreated origins are always at the same time the source of the self and utterly Other. This might be because of the autobiographer's split from her origins was caused by a traumatic rift (or, less dramatically, by growing up and going away). Moreover, the origins of an autobiographical self in places, cultures, families or the body of the mother are always situated in an Other, or other people. As Susanna Egan writes, 'taking control of the story involves ... embedding that story in the cultural context and materials to which it belongs.'²⁵ This concept of the origin as same and Other will be pursued within various fields of study: feminist theory of autobiography and of mythmaking, psychoanalysis and theories of narrative selves, concepts of memory and the past, utopia and nostalgia, the female body and diaspora. The secondary material I have used is, again, highly eclectic. However, as I have argued before, the particular nature of autobiography, situated 'between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object'²⁶ makes it highly suited for making connections between disparate-seeming areas of knowledge. Elspeth Probyn argues that, in looking at autobiography, 'we can begin to analyse and articulate the relation of "theoretical problems" to "lived experience" ... to conceive of moments of the self as points of view that allow

²⁵ Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk*, p. 30.

insight into the construction of particular conjunctural social moments.’²⁷ I would like to borrow the idea of conjunctural moments of the self and use it out of Probyn’s own context of autobiography as a source for social history. The autobiographies explored in this thesis will be read as points of conjuncture between different forms of theory, and between theory and lived life. This also implies that the autobiographies themselves are shaped by their discursive context (for example, Woolf’s and H. D.’s ways of thinking about memory are influenced by Freudian theory). On the other hand, the autobiographers rework and rewrite the theories they employ (especially H. D. in creating her own, mythical version of psychoanalysis). The texts provide a space where highly different concepts and theories can be brought together to spark off new insights. At the same time, the autobiographies’ insistence on ‘lived life’ offers a point of view from which to reflect on the impact of theoretical discourses on living selves (this argument will become most prominent in the chapter on autobiography and female embodiment).

In the next, second chapter, I will go on to explore feminist theories of myth and feminist theories of autobiography. The concept of autobiography as myth of origin will be fleshed out, and situated in the field of autobiography studies. Chapter Three will focus on autobiography and female embodiment. I will

²⁶ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 7.

argue that 'how one becomes a woman' is intimately connected to various discourses of femininity, tracing the autobiographers' depiction of gendered bodily experience along the topics of anger, sexuality, culturally diverse 'techniques of the body' and illness; furthermore, I will address the crucial issue of the relationship between 'body' and 'text' within autobiography. In Chapter Four, I will use H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud* as an example of the autobiographical myth of return, especially that of a return to one's childhood. This is related to the 'Demeter and Persephone' myth of the daughter's return to the mother. I will explore H. D.'s use of transference to facilitate the return to the mother as well as the return to ancient, mythical time, and I will trace the complex connections between myth, autobiography and psychoanalysis. In Chapter Five, I will introduce the problematics of time in the autobiographies. First, I will look at theories of narrative selfhood that relate autobiography to a therapeutic attempt at understanding the past and thus gaining control over one's life, and the ways in which, in tales of 'how did we become the way we are today', the present and past influence and shape each other. Second, I will explore the connection between autobiography and utopia: the narrator's origins can be rooted in a 'golden age', a dreamed-of future that is projected backwards onto the past. Several autobiographers make use of motifs found in utopian literature in order to connect the narrator to an imaginary past that might provide a blueprint for a different future. Third, I will focus on the

²⁷ Elspeth Probyn (1993) *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 101.

‘haunting past’ that is at once unreachable and overwhelming, and on the frightening possibility of becoming stuck in the past, bound to it by a hopeless nostalgia. Chapter Six will be concerned with ‘first memory’ episodes within the autobiographies. From there on, I will branch out into the different kinds of memory described in the autobiographies (I have called them the snapshot memory, the narrative memory and the super-memory); and into more general questions of autobiographical memory. Primarily, I will analyse how autobiographers, paradoxically, construct a coherent sense of self out of disparate and contradictory memories. The issues broached in Chapter Five and Six are explored further in Chapter Seven on autobiography and diaspora: Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston and Eva Hoffman, all of whom see themselves as part of a diaspora, use autobiography as a means of connecting themselves to a place or culture of origin, while acknowledging that this means recreating their origins rather than connecting themselves to an existing place.

Throughout this thesis, four main conclusions will emerge: that myth is a force of connection, and, as an especially important element of this, it is mythmaking that creates a link between mother and daughter; that introducing mythical time has a palpable effect on the time structures within the autobiographies, and, finally, that a complex, interactive relationship between self and Other is brought out by the autobiographical myth of origin.

Stories and myths become a source of strength, worked differently by each generation—fragmentary bits translated, integrated and reworked into a powerful rhetoric at every moment.

(Catherine Lappas)¹

Chapter Two

Feminist Theories of Myth and Autobiography

In the following chapter, I will sketch out the theoretical background of this project. Bringing myth and autobiography together, I am drawing on feminist theories of myth. On the other hand, I am concerned with many of the issues that have been highlighted by feminist theories of autobiography. Thus, I think it is vital at this point to introduce both the framework of theory on myth and that of feminist theory of autobiography, and outline my own reading of autobiography as myth of origin.

1. Feminist Theories of Myth

Although the problem of defining myth is a notoriously thorny one, I will begin my discussion of feminist mythmaking with some attempts to find definitions of myth that are useful for a feminist reading. The editor of the *Feminist Companion to Mythology* offers a working definition of myth as ‘a collection of stories belonging to a single cultural group.’² Wendy Doniger, in *The Implied Spider*, provides a more detailed definition:

¹ Catherine Lappas (1994) “‘The Way I Heard It Was ...’: Myth, Memory and Autobiography in *Storyteller* and *The Woman Warrior*.’ In: *CEA-Critic: Official Journal of the College English Association* 57:1, Fall 1994, p. 58.

² Carolyne Larrington (1992) *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*. London: Pandora, p. xi.

all myths are stories, but not all stories are myths. ... What a myth *is* is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people ... it is a story believed to ... have been composed in the past about an event in the past ... an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories.³

On the other hand, Freudian theorists have seen myths as an expression of universal laws of psychology. For Bruno Bettelheim, for example, myths and fairytales trace the ubiquitous story of a child's development: the hero is the child, and the kings and queens are in fact the child's parents.⁴ In this sense, myths are always 'true': they re-enact what has happened in everyone's childhood since time immemorial. This means that mythical elements can be found in everyone's past, or, seen the other way round, that myth is a veiled representation of child development.

Since myths are, in Juliet Mitchell's words, 'stories ... to explain other stories',⁵ they can be used to make sense of the world, in order to explain, or lay down a moral code.⁶ Marina Warner, in her discussion of myth, combines two

³ Wendy Doniger (1998) *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 2.

⁴ Bruno Bettelheim (1978 [1989]) *The Uses of Enchantment: The Power and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Vintage.

⁵ Juliet Mitchell (1984) *Women: The Longest Revolution: Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis*. London: Virago, p. 297.

⁶ Isobel White and Helen Payne distinguish between three different types of myth: the myth as history (containing the imagined past of the culture); myth as explanation (of natural phenomena or, as myth of origin, of the creation of the cosmos or the origins of a society); or myth as charter (setting up binding ethics and values). See White and Payne (1992)

different characteristics of myth: myths are colourful and phantastic as well as explanatory, and they always posit fundamental questions. Myths are about 'the forbidden and the alluring, the sacred and the profane, conjuring demons and heroes, saying who we are and what we want, telling a story which makes sense of things.'⁷ They do also, as Larrington argues, work to shape our perceptions of gender: 'Myths ... have determined both how we [women] see ourselves and how society regards us.'⁸

Feminist writers attempting to use existing theories of myth come up against a major problem: most of these theories are still dominated by either Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis or structuralist frameworks. The problem with both is their ahistorical tendency to theorise myths as universal: in Jungian psychoanalysis, all great and 'true' myths are essentially the same, because they arise from a collective unconscious that is universal. Lévi-Strauss assumes that a universal structure of the mind is responsible for the underlying basic structures of myth which are the same the world over, though the elements from which the myth is assembled may change.⁹ This means that gendered positions (the hero who moves through the story, the woman who passively

'Australian Aboriginal Myth.' In: Carolyne Larrington, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, pp. 251-87.

⁷ Marina Warner (1995) *From the Beast to the Blonde: Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage, p. 68.

⁸ Carolyne Larrington, *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, p. xi.

⁹ See Cynthia A. Davis (1990) 'Archetype and Structure: On Feminist Myth Criticism.' In: Joanne Glasgow and Angela Ingram, eds., *Courage and Tools: The Florence Howe Award for Feminist Scholarship*. New York: MLA, pp. 109-18.

awaits him) are assumed to be unchangeable and universal.¹⁰ For Marina Warner, these universalist theories of myths and fairytales mask the historical conditions that shaped the stories: the cliché of the evil stepmother cannot be separated from the history of frequent deaths in childhood and subsequent remarriages in early modern Europe. Separating the stories from the histories make misogynist stereotypes seem suspiciously like ‘the way things are.’¹¹

However, myth contains the historical, specific, local, or personal as well as the universal. Marina Warner had defined myth as ‘conjuring demons and heroes’ as well as ‘saying who we are and what we want’ in the here and now.¹² Wendy Doniger, who offers a feminist revision of the structuralist position on myth, distinguishes between a ‘macromyth’ and a ‘micromyth’: the ‘macromyth’ is the universal underlying structure that can be found across several cultures, while the ‘micromyth’ is the filled-in actual version, shaped by the culture where it is told, the circumstances of the time, and the embellishments made by the storyteller.¹³ Thelma Shinn uses feminist Jungian theories of myth in *Worlds within Women*, a study of mythmaking in feminist science-fiction. For her, the two faces of myth are the underlying ancient myth and the written version, the cultural myth. The ancient myth is associated with the Goddess, matriarchal culture and orality, whereas the cultural myth is patriarchal,

¹⁰ See especially Teresa De Lauretis (1987) ‘The Violence of Rhetoric.’ In: *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹¹ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 417.

¹² Ibid., p. 68.

written, and obscures the underlying ancient myth. The feminist mythmaker, in rewriting a cultural myth, must attempt to unearth the traces of the ancient myth beneath it, and, at the same time, be true to the original storytelling culture that created the ancient myth. Thus, she can write 'a new story which once again embodies the ancient myth in the language of our time and place.'¹⁴ Shinn avoids the stifling effect of extrapolating a singular universal myth that is superior to its many corrupted versions: while the underlying ancient myth is oral and multi-faceted, the traditional cultural version of the myth is at the same time a distortion of the ancient myth *and* frozen in time. To go beyond the cultural myth the feminist mythmaker needs to paradoxically return to the universal myth and create a wholly new story at the same time.

Cynthia Davis, a feminist literary critic who works on myth within literature, chooses a more pragmatic approach. She abstains from claiming that there is an originary, matriarchal ancient myth suppressed by patriarchal culture. Instead, she argues that it is important to always 'treat myth in literature (as in culture) as *tradition*'. Consciousness of myth as transmitted through history, custom and literature can allow the critic to distinguish between different meanings for the 'same' story or figure.'¹⁵ Instead of trying to extrapolate or creatively recapture the underlying Ur-myth, this perspective focuses on the transmission,

¹³ See Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*.

¹⁴ Thelma Shinn (1986) *Worlds Within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women*. London and New York: Greenwood, p. x.

¹⁵ Cynthia Davis, 'Archetype and Structure', p. 116.

on each retelling or version of the myth. Thus, it can be pitted against the universalism of Jungian or structuralist myth theory. Hans Blumenberg argues that ‘the myth that is varied and transformed by its receptions, in the forms in which it is related to ... history, deserves to be made a subject of study.’¹⁶ This way of looking at myth is, in my opinion, especially fruitful when looking at retellings of myth within autobiography: they are by definition highly personal versions, shaped by the teller’s own history and wider context, and they are, at times, highly irreverent towards the traditional myth.¹⁷ As Maxine Hong Kingston puts it: ‘stories and myths stay alive when they change like that. That is being alive. But when they are frozen in one version, then they die.’¹⁸

For feminist mythmakers, there are three possible strategies to overcome the androcentric bias of most traditional myth. First, they can claim that there is a submerged tradition of women’s mythmaking going back to matriarchal times, which preserves the ancient myth that became distorted by subsequent patriarchal appropriation. Thus, they can maintain that it is possible to detect the ancient story behind its patriarchal guise (either distorted through androcentric tradition or transmitted in ‘code’ by subversive storytellers). Many theorists have used a Jungian framework in order to corroborate their belief in

¹⁶ Hans Blumenberg (1979 [1985]) *Work on Myth*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge/Massachusetts: MIT Press, p. 417.

¹⁷ See, for example, Audre Lorde’s retelling of the Pygmalion myth that depicts the protagonist as a black, female Pygmalion attempting to breathe life into her unresponsive, marble statue-like white lover (*Zami*, pp. 129-30).

the origin of myth in ancient matriarchies. For example, Annis Pratt claims that archetypes within women's literature (especially goddess archetypes) speak of an authentic women's selfhood that flourished in pre-patriarchal times. Now, 'our literature is structured from a tension between our cultural [read: patriarchal] and our authentic selves.'¹⁹ The second possibility is to discard misogynist patriarchal myths and create new, feminist ones. As Jane Caputi puts it: 'The journey engaged in by many contemporary feminists is twofold: one involving both patriarchal myth-smashing and woman-identified myth-making.'²⁰ The third possibility, and this is the one followed by most of the autobiographers discussed here, is to 'steal' from classical myth and insert oneself in the rich tradition of literary retellings.²¹ Robert Eisner argues that though myth as a totality tends to lay down the law, 'a literary telling, mythical or fictional, revels in ... ambiguity, duplicity, irony, playfulness, openness.'²² For a feminist writer, this offers the possibility to either exploit the ambiguity of a story or create her own personal myth, an alternative story of origins and

¹⁸ Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (1998) 'Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston.' In: Laura Skandera-Trombley, ed. *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*. New York: G. K. Hall, pp. 33-50; p. 36.

¹⁹ Annis Pratt (1994) *Dancing with Goddesses: Archetypes, Poetry, and Empowerment*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. xiv.

²⁰ Jane Caputi (1992) 'On Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking.' In: Carolyn Larrington, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, pp. 425-40; p. 427.

²¹ Adriana Cavarero states playfully, in her introduction to *In Spite of Plato*: 'Nonetheless, our need for mythic figures is still present. Certainly, the best solution would be for us to admit that our new thought and the fresh, new subjectivity we have constituted call for *new* figures. ... By now women's literature offers a significant pantheon of heroines. Unfortunately, I know little about literature, and even less about creating figures. So I have stolen them.' Adriana Cavarero (1995) *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. Translated by Susan Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healey. Oxford: Polity Press, p. 4.

²² Robert Eisner (1987) *The Road to Daulis: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Classical Mythology*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, p. 249.

growth. It is by pitting the micromyth, the singular, localised version of a myth, against the universality of the macromyth, that many irreverent, personal versions of myths can emerge (even though the mythmakers might imagine themselves as going back to an even older, ancient, matriarchal myth).

2. Autobiography as Myth of Origin

In the argument that follows, autobiography and myth are connected by their in-between status: they share a 'double focus' on the personal and the collective, the local and the universal. Although the autobiographies relate personal histories, they can open out to create 'imagined communities' of people who share important parts of that history with the autobiographer. At the same time, using myth, she can connect herself to the universal, and to ancient, mythical time. As I have already sketched out in the introduction, the connection between autobiography and myth of origin I am going to make works in two directions. On the one hand, I will be concerned with autobiographers' use or creation of myths of origin. Writers use myth, for example, to connect themselves to their culture of origin in a diasporic situation, or to explore their relationship to their parents in childhood through comparing it to mythical tellings of parent-child relationships. On the other hand, I will contend that autobiography in itself is a kind of myth of origin, a recreation of the forces that created the narrator. Catherine Lappas argues that, in many women writers' autobiographies, 'myths weave themselves through, and eventually transform into, personal narrative.' Thus, it becomes clear that

‘mythic discourse is an exaggerated form of self-narration ...’.²³ In the autobiographical narrative, the personal and the mythical merge into each other, and the autobiographical I is transformed into a mythical figure: for example, Kingston’s girl protagonist is transformed into the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan.

However, myths of origin of the self have been seen as extremely problematic. Donna Haraway frequently states that the creation of a myth of origin (of the self, or ‘Science’, or ‘Man’) necessitates the creation of an Other that is gendered female and used as ‘a pretext [for creating history] not an author and subject of history’ or ‘raw material for crucial transitions to higher stages.’²⁴ This means that, for Haraway, patriarchal origin myths narrate the emergence of history (of ‘Man’) from a feminine Other (‘Nature’) whose sole purpose is to be the ‘raw material’ that makes this history possible. For Haraway, ‘gender’ and ‘genesis’ are inextricably bound together.²⁵ In order to overcome these central phallogocentric myths, ‘the tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalised identities’. Haraway does not believe in feminist origin stories of ‘once-upon-

²³ Catherine Lappas, ‘Myth, Memory and Autobiography’, p. 61.

²⁴ Donna Haraway (1989 [1992]) *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. London and New York: Verso, p. 280 and 283. The ‘crucial transition to higher stages’ refers to narratives that describe the origin of Man as a heroic transition from male ape to man caused by the ‘historical achievement of fatherhood’ and the invention of the heterosexual nuclear family (pp. 282-3).

²⁵ Donna Haraway (1991) ‘A Cyborg Manifesto.’ In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books, pp. 149-81; p. 150.

a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man' but holds that alternative narratives are rather 'about the power to survive ... on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them [the narrators] as other.'²⁶

Similarly, Sidonie Smith warns that the origin myth inscribed in traditional autobiography is already an androcentric one. This means that the female autobiographer

reinscribes the myth of origins embedded in the discourse of man, ...

[justifying] her claim to membership in the world of words, men, and public spaces ... thereby reproducing the myth of patriarchal origins and the narratives it underwrites. ... But ... she also perpetuates the political, social and textual disempowerment of mothers and daughters.²⁷

Smith uses *A Cyborg Manifesto* in order to argue that, for a feminist theory of autobiography, the focus should not be on the origins of self, but on 'map[ping] alternative futures for the "I".'²⁸ However, I believe that narratives of origin are still of interest, and that they do not necessarily produce the totalising narrative of the male hero or the equally totalising narrative of blissful matriarchal unity 'before the Fall'.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 175.

²⁷ Sidonie Smith (1987) *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 53.

²⁸ Sidonie Smith (1993) *Subjectivity, Autobiography, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 182.

Suzette Henke claims that, in the healing autobiography of trauma, 'the author recasts his or her life narrative in the shape of a salutary paradigm that offers both a myth of origins and an implicitly teleological model for future development.'²⁹ In the following, I would like to show that things are not as easy as that: a myth of origin does not necessarily branch out into a neat narrative pointing towards a future of wholeness. In the autobiographies I will discuss, the origin is always situated in another place (the mythical homeland) or (an)other person(s): (the mother, the family, the chosen community). The personal origins of the self are lost in childhood amnesia, and have to be filled in with the stories of other people. On the other hand, the autobiographers' family or culture of origin is often deeply unsettling, and it is *in spite of this* that the adult narrator comes to reclaim and rewrite the origins. This process is always made visible in the text itself. Next to the utopian past of the imaginary homeland lies the dystopian past where the narrator fears to become stranded. Moreover, there is also the possibility that the narrator will become caught in a painful nostalgia, fixated on a perfect image of the past.

The focus on the myth of origin will open up a discussion of narrative, and of the ways in which autobiography seems to be bound to transform an incoherent sea of memories, collected facts and recalled emotions into a story that explains exactly how the narrator came to be the person she is today. In the

²⁹ Suzette Henke (1998) *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. xv.

next chapter, I will explore how the experience of female embodiment, and 'becoming a woman' is described within the autobiographies. Then, the focus will be on the possibilities of an autobiographical, mythical and psychoanalytic return to the origin/the mother. Further on, the salient topics will be the connections between self and memory (and especially first and early memories); the interaction between past and present in shaping a life story; and the relationship between myths of origin and diaspora. The autobiographies will be used as the point of connection between theoretical frameworks and the importance of 'lived life' that informs the issues outlined above.

The concept of myth 'in culture' that I have outlined above will also be crucial to my project. Autobiographers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Audre Lorde, writing from a position of diaspora, use myth in order to connect themselves to their place and culture of origin: This place of origin has become mythical in itself, because it, for them, only existed in stories told to them by their mothers (I will explore this point in detail in the chapter on diaspora). However, Kingston and Lorde also address the kind of myths that have been used as cautionary tales in order to circumscribe what women can and cannot, or must and must not, be or do. This is made very explicit in Kingston's retelling of the cautionary tale of 'No Name Woman' (whose afterlife in memory has been taken away by her family as a punishment for having an illegitimate child). Thus, feminist autobiographers who use myth in this way have to 'turn the myth around' in order to make it into an empowering tale. However, cultures

are not monolithic entities. Both Lorde and Kingston use one part of their cultural tradition against another dominant, misogynist narrative: Maxine Hong Kingston pits Taoist wisdom that sees woman and man as yin and yang, equally essential for the turning of the world,³⁰ against hegemonic (Confucian) Chinese misogynist traditions: 'A husband may kill a wife that disobeys him. Confucius said that.' (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 173) Although her own 'Chinatown' is steeped in them, the narrator keeps her ears open for other, non-misogynist traditions: 'I read in an anthropology book that Chinese say, "Girls are necessary too." ... Perhaps it was a saying in another village.' (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 53)

Because myth is situated between the individual and the collective, the historical and the ahistorical (the mythical 'eternal present' where several of the autobiographers situate the mythical stories they tell), the use of myth makes it possible for the autobiographer to 'have her cake and eat it': she can be at once part of a dominant narrative, or connect herself to a culture or place, she can be invested with the authority of the mythmaker, and she can be

³⁰ 'I saw two people made of gold dancing the earth's dances. They turned so perfectly that they were the axis of the earth's turning. ... And I understood ... how one of the dancers is always a man and the other a woman.' *The Woman Warrior*, pp. 31-2.

See also Tao Tao Liu (1992), 'Chinese Myths and Legends.' In: Catherine Larrington, *Feminist Companion to Mythology*: 'Woman's position in Confucian society was low. ... However, [in Taoism] the attitude to male and female was that of complement and opposition, neither necessarily holding the upper hand.' (p. 230) For a discussion of the use of traditional Taoist symbols in the Fa Mu Lan story, (amounting, for the knowledgeable reader, to a parodic 'symbolic overkill'), see Kathryn VanSpanckeren (1991) 'The Asian Literary Background of *The Woman Warrior*.' In: Shirley Lim, ed. *Approaches to Teaching the 'Woman Warrior'*, pp. 44-51, p. 51.

subversive, questioning the narrative and carving out her own version. In a reversal of this move, mythmaking can also branch out from the individual to the collective: Audre Lorde's biomythographical reconstruction of a matrilineal heritage that includes Caribbean dykes and healers and West African goddesses is an invitation to others to take part in tracing the lines of 'matrilineal diaspora'. Mythmaking is a license to create a whole alternative world—a Caribbean island inhabited by strong and loving women or a China full of women warriors and ghosts, or a congregation of peace-loving Moravian brothers—of one's own.

3. Feminist Theories of Autobiography

In order to situate my project within the wider context of feminist theory of autobiography as well, I will start with a short overview of its history, sketching out the issues raised that are important for this thesis. I am aware that my reading will be only one possible version of this history,³¹ and a simplification of a very rich and diverse field. To make matters more complicated, feminist theory of autobiography is an article-based discipline. This means that a lot of the available material is grouped in collections, from

³¹ For other historical overviews on feminist theory of autobiography, see Liz Stanley (1992) *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press; Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses*; and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1999) 'Introduction.' In: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1999) eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 3-52.

the earlier ones edited by Domna Stanton,³² Celeste Schenck and Bella Brodzki³³ and Shari Benstock³⁴ that helped to define the field to the recent comprehensive reader edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson that endeavours to encompass a twelve year-period of theory-production concerning women's autobiography.³⁵ The problem with this is that authors who apply very different theoretical frameworks (sometimes without even stating where they 'come from') get grouped together in one volume, and inevitably it is the editors' introductions or leading articles that become privileged over the other contributions. As Liz Stanley puts it:

These theoretical influences cut across the intentions of many of the contributors and sometimes the editors themselves—for example, most of Benstock's contributors ignore her psychoanalytic approach to theorising the female self and instead opt for a historical and cultural approach ...

Polyphony is the wrong word really, for these voices are not of co-equals; the result is more like an opera composed of a few protagonists and a chorus composed of erstwhile protagonists from several other operas.³⁶

On the other hand, this chorus of varied voices gives the reader an impression of the multitude of possible approaches towards women's autobiography. In

³² Domna Stanton, ed. (1987) *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth Century*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

³³ Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds. (1988) *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

³⁴ Shari Benstock, ed. (1988) *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. London and New York: Routledge.

³⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*.

³⁶ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, pp. 95 and 98-9.

my opinion, editors' policy to allow different theoretical approaches in their collections should be seen as constructive, furthering diversity and open debate. For example, in *The Private Self*, Shari Benstock's Lacanian article on modernist autobiographies is directly followed by Susan Stanford Friedman's contribution that harshly criticises Lacanian psychoanalysis for ignoring the reality of the suppression of women's voices within patriarchal systems.

The polyphony of critical voices makes it somewhat difficult to give an overview of the development of 'women's autobiography' as a field of study. However, I am going to attempt this by roughly grouping the theoretical approaches to women's autobiographies into three strands. One views genre as the crucial issue, trying to tease out the connections between genre and gender, and establishing women's autobiography as a genre in its own right, with its own history. Another possible viewpoint explores the difficulties of positing a female subject: the problematic status of this female subject (as a universally *female* subject across the boundaries of time and space and as a female *subject* allegedly impossible within an androcentric system) calls into question the belief that there is such a thing as women's autobiography. The third strand is more concerned with difference: some critics argue that gender alone is not sufficient as a lens for reading autobiography and introduce other elements, like race, class, or postcolonial selves. For example, in Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's collection *De/colonizing the subject*, lesbian identity is grouped not under 'gender' but under 'colonised identities'.

i. Genre

The question of genre has always been difficult for autobiographical theory. In the introduction, I have already mentioned Philippe Lejeune's criteria for separating the autobiography proper from the diary on the one hand and from the autobiographical novel on the other. The problem with attempting to define autobiography as a genre—whether as a fixed set of characteristics, as autobiographical pact or as 'horizon of expectations'³⁷ governed by the reader—is that any definition can develop into a Procrustean bed for cutting off those autobiographical writers who seek to expand the limits of the genre, as my own selection of autobiographical 'limit-cases' shows. The beginnings of a discussion of genre within feminist theory of autobiography are marked by a struggle with a decidedly misogynist tradition of reading women's autobiographies. Domna Stanton, in her introduction to *The Female Autograph*, argues that on the one hand, within traditional autobiography criticism, 'women's autobiographies [were] conspicuous by their absence.'³⁸ On the other hand, writing by women (Stanton uses Colette as an example) was often read as autobiographical. This was then used to prove that women 'could not transcend, but only record, the concerns of the private self ... the

³⁷ See Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses*, p. 233. The term 'horizon of expectations' was coined by Tzvetan Todorov, in his article 'The Origin of Genres', in *New Literary History* 8.1 (autumn 1976), pp. 159-70; p. 163.

³⁸ Domna Stanton (1987) Autogynography: Is the Subject Different? In Domna Stanton, ed. (1987) *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, pp. 3-20; p. 4.

autobiographical [was] wielded as a weapon to denigrate female texts'³⁹

This reads like a vicious Catch-22 situation: writings by women can not be autobiographies, but they are nothing but autobiographical.⁴⁰

The need to establish 'women's autobiography' as a separate field that is worthy of study, as well as the influence of the psychological theories developed by Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, have led to the claim that women's autobiography is, or can be, 'autobiography in a different voice'; a different genre from men's autobiography, with a history and tradition of its own. This claim has sparked books staking a claim for women's autobiography as a genre, for example Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* or Estelle Jelinek's *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present*. Estelle Jelinek claims that women's autobiographies are different from men's both in form and content: they favour discontinuous forms like letters, diaries and journals over linear forms and tend to focus on relationships to other people more than the writer's own self-development.⁴¹ Mary Mason claims that women's autobiographies have a 'double focus'⁴² on the autobiographers themselves and another person, or a family, community,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See also Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, p. 15: '... the majority of critics still persist in either erasing women's story, relegating it to the margins of critical discourse, or ... uncritically conflating the dynamics of male and female selfhood and textuality.'

⁴¹ Estelle Jelinek (1986) *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present*. Boston: Twayne.

and, in the case of the female mystics whom she uses as base for her analysis, God. Mason claims that it is this double focus that 'ties these [mystics'] life stories together and draws them into proximity with autobiographical excursions by later women writers while setting them apart from autobiographies written by men in any place and time.'⁴³ The extraordinary claim made here is that the universal characteristics of woman writers (within patriarchal cultures) shape their works more than contemporary culture or the moment in history when they were written: Julian of Norwich's and Sylvia Plath's writings have more in common with each other than they do with texts by other male medieval religious writers or twentieth century modernists.

In an article influenced by object-relations theory, Susan Stanford Friedman claims that the selves described within women's autobiographies are more fluid and constructed in relation to others, especially (in the cases of *The Woman Warrior* and *Zami*) the mother.⁴⁴ While men can allow themselves the luxury of thinking of themselves as individuals, women, like slaves, are constantly reminded of their marginal group identity that is imposed from the outside. However, women writers can also reclaim the community of women,

⁴² I have used the term 'double focus' differently: to describe the way in which myth is related to the universal and the particular. There is simply no other term that conveys as clearly the connectedness between the very large and the very small.

⁴³ Mary Mason (1980 [1988]) 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers.' In Bella Brodzki und Celeste Schenck, eds. (1988) *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 19-44; p. 44.

⁴⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman (1988) 'Women's Autobiographical Selves.' In Shari Benstock, ed. (1988) *The Private Self. Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 34-62.

and the closeness to the mother, and transcend the 'cultural hall of mirrors' that prescribes what women are or should be. Joan Lidoff, in her programmatically titled 'Autobiography in a Different Voice' which reads *The Woman Warrior* through the lens of Chodorow's and Gilligan's theories, argues that 'gender does affect genre' and that women's 'less definitive sense of boundary is reflected in women's fiction.'⁴⁵ However, both Mason and Friedman acknowledge that there are cases where this fluidity of boundaries can become dangerous, where a woman's sense of self is violated until it dissolves, leading to a deference to men (as in Anaïs Nin's diaries)⁴⁶ or to an imprisonment by others that makes it impossible to attain selfhood (as in Charlotte P. Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*).⁴⁷ However, this relational, fluid female subjectivity holds some possibilities for women's self-empowerment, unlike a masculine subjectivity that defines itself in opposition to the world: according to George Gusdorf, autobiography does not flourish in cultures where 'the individual does not oppose himself to all others'.⁴⁸ Sidonie Smith's eloquent description of this subject echoes the concerns of many feminist writers on autobiography:

... the subject of traditional autobiography marshaled the vagaries of his unique history under the banner of the universal subject. Through his

⁴⁵ Joan Lidoff, 'Autobiography in a Different Voice'. In Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ed. (1991) *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's 'The Woman Warrior'*. New York: MLA, pp. 116-20; p. 116.

⁴⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves', pp. 44-46.

⁴⁷ Mary Mason, 'The Other Voice', p. 44.

⁴⁸ Gusdorf, quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves', p. 35.

practice he reaffirmed, reproduced and celebrated the agentive autonomy and disembodiment of the universal subject, valorising individuality and separateness while erasing personal and communal interdependencies. ...

Woman, mother and the feminine ... were part of the 'mess and clutter' of the nonidentical that the autobiographer had to clear out as he struggled toward self-identity and the narrative of a coherent past.⁴⁹

However, the kind of autobiography criticism that pits a fluid, relational feminine autobiographical self against a closed-off masculine autobiographical self came in for criticism, particularly for being essentialist. Laura Marcus argues that we should 'stop equating autobiographies by men with their idealised representation in conventional autobiographical criticism.'⁵⁰

Moreover, the use of object-relations theory might reintroduce the notion of an innate female selflessness that is not borne out in the texts themselves: 'Both Stein and Woolf ... explore the impact of another's life on one's own, although they do so in ways that trouble any simple model of innate "altruism".'⁵¹

Sidonie Smith, in her *Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, posits women's autobiography as a genre in its own right, approaching it from an angle similar to that of gynocriticism: she explores the problems women autobiographers face in trying to introduce themselves into a literary system where the lives described in autobiographies, and the process of writing itself, is seen as

⁴⁹ Sidonie Smith (1993) *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses*, p. 220.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 222.

intrinsically male.⁵² The autobiographer must negotiate between the 'life script' of the masculine subject and notions of femininity, sometimes by becoming her father's daughter and despising her mother's femininity,⁵³ even to the extent of cross-dressing and living as a man, as the example of the eighteenth-century actor and adventurer Charlotte Charke shows.

However, in all the models of women's autobiography I have discussed here, the fundamental difference between men's and women's autobiographies is not grounded in biology, or in psychology alone, but rather in history. For Friedman, object-relations theory opens up the possibility to develop 'a psycho-political perspective based in the lives of women.'⁵⁴ For Sidonie Smith, the different autobiographies women write are grounded in their marginalised position within the literary field: 'Historically absent from both the public sphere and modes of written narrative, women were compelled to tell their stories differently ... at least since medieval autobiographer Margery Kempe.'⁵⁵ What I believe to be useful about this approach to women's autobiography is the grounding of women's autobiography in their historical context. From medieval times, women writers have struggled with androcentric definitions of what it means to be a writer, and what defines a successful 'life'. On the other

⁵² Sidonie Smith (1987) *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁵³ See also Domna Stanton, 'Autogynography', p. 12 on the 'matrophobia' displayed by some female autobiographers.

⁵⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves', p. 55.

⁵⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p. 12.

hand, this kind of approach puts women in a position that is forever marginal, 'absent from history' and does not take into account the different ways in which women writers throughout history have attempted to carve out a space for themselves *within* the literary system. As Gillian Whitlock puts it: 'Exactly *how* the subject negotiates a space to speak ... is important.'⁵⁶

Nevertheless, claiming to have unearthed a marginal women's tradition has strategic advantages: it gives strength to the demand that these women's voices be heard. A good example of this is Joanna M. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*.⁵⁷ The volume's title is its programme: to put on the map a distinct tradition of black women's autobiography, as this was a genre scarcely mentioned by both black and feminist literary criticism. The autobiographies Braxton discusses range from slave narratives to Maya Angelou's decidedly modern *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Braxton argues that, although the autobiographers create hybrids of genres like the spiritual autobiography and the travelogue of adventures, they speak of a collective experience: 'like the blues singer, the autobiographer incorporates communal values into the performance of the autobiographical

⁵⁶ Gillian Whitlock (2000) *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*. London and New York: Cassell, p. 2, my italics.

⁵⁷ Joanne M. Braxton (1989) *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

act, sometimes rising to function as the “point of consciousness” of her people.’⁵⁸

The great advantage of the ‘genre’ model is its political thrust: there is a recognition of the reality of women’s oppression. Within this framework, women’s autobiography is seen as a useful device for building a sense of community and solidarity, or make a political appeal on behalf of this community, especially in the case of testimonial writing or *testimonios*.⁵⁹ On the other hand, this insistence on aspects of femininity held to be universal tends to obscure the differences between different women writer’s autobiographies. Moreover, as I have argued before, if one takes the relationality of female selves for granted, it becomes hard to see the complex negotiations women writers have had to make in order to gain a sense of selfhood without being ostracised.⁶⁰ Critics who are strongly influenced by Foucauldian theory, like Gillian Whitlock and Leigh Gilmore, insist that women autobiographers are never purely marginal, but have to work within and against the concepts of female subjectivity prevalent in the society or culture(s) in which they are situated.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁹ See Doris Sommer (1988) ‘Not Just a Personal Story: Women’s *Testimonios* and the Plural Self.’ In: Schenck and Brodzki, eds. *Life/Lines*., pp. 107-30.

⁶⁰ See also Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*, p. 10: ‘To call attention to her distinctiveness is to become “unfeminine”. To take a voice and authorize a public life are to risk loss of reputation.’

ii. Subject

The second strand of feminist theory of autobiography is concerned with the question whether it is possible to develop a sense of female subjectivity within a system where the subject is male. Domna C. Stanton's introductory essay to *The Female Autograph* marks a shift in the theorising of some feminist critics of autobiography, from a concern with gender and genre to a concern with gender and subjectivity. Stanton criticises the idea of a self-contained genre of 'women's autobiography' and of 'a specifically female type of narrative discontinuity'⁶¹ produced by a more fluid female psychology, since there are so many diverse women's autobiographies, and so many 'fragmented' men's autobiographies. Since it is impossible to separate women's subjectivity from its cultural surroundings within patriarchal systems, it would be difficult to 'separate a manifestation of female difference from a strategic conformity'.⁶²

However, the problem that is crucial for her is that of the female I involved in autobiography. Feminist theory of autobiography, as both Friedman and Stanton see it, is battling against two androcentric modes of reading autobiography: the traditional, individualist, but largely gender-blind mode (the one employed, for example, by Gusdorf and Olney), and a deconstructionist or Lacanian viewpoint that sees the autobiographical self as an illusion, and/or wants to dispose of the author altogether. While Friedman responds to this by

⁶¹ Domna Stanton, 'Autogynography', p. 11.

⁶² Ibid., p. 13.

anchoring her theory in 'women's lives', Stanton takes on board poststructuralist arguments that portray the subject as discursively produced. On the other hand, Stanton believes in the importance of women autobiographers asserting their own selfhood, authorship and signature. The deconstructionists saw women's autobiographies as proof that 'because of woman's different status in the symbolic order, autogynography ... dramatized the fundamental alterity and nonpresence of the subject, even as it asserts itself discursively and strives toward an always impossible self-possession.'⁶³ Against this, Stanton wants to uphold the possibility of subjectivity and authorship for women writers: 'I had to privilege and promote the female signature ... or else endure and ensure more of the phallogocentric same.'⁶⁴ Thus, she ends her article with an aporia, discarding universalist theories but preserving 'the heuristic exploration of sexual/textual differences.'⁶⁵

Coming from an explicitly Lacanian position, Shari Benstock sees female subjectivity as an impossibility. She likens the writing of an autobiography to the Lacanian mirror stage: like the child (who sees itself as fragmented and its mirror image as whole and complete), the autobiographer creates a stable autobiographical self to conceal and ward off the anxieties and discontinuities produced by the act of writing an autobiography. Since the autobiographical self functions like a mirror image that is at once self and not-self, and

⁶³ Ibid., p. 15.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

discontinuous across time, the writer's own sense of self becomes problematic. Constructing an unproblematic autobiographical self conceals this problematic nature of the self: 'The effect is magical—the self appears organic, the present the total sum of the past, the past appears as an accurate predictor of the future.'⁶⁶ Again, as in Stanton's paraphrase of the deconstructionist argument, it is in women's writing, especially modernist women's writing, that the impossibility of the subject becomes clear: women do not have the discursive power to uphold an illusory stable self. The writings of Djuna Barnes, Isak Dinesen, H. D., Mina Loy, Anaïs Nin, Jean Rhys, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf all exhibit 'fissures of female discontinuity',⁶⁷ while their male counterparts still cling on to the unitary, white, male heterosexual subject. The female autobiographical subject is still fundamentally unstable, but instead of a fluidity at its boundaries, it is the acknowledgement of an internal split between the subject who narrates and the object of self-scrutiny that makes it less unitary than that of male autobiographers.

Leigh Gilmore, in *Autobiographics*, looks at women's autobiographies from a Foucauldian point of view, linking them to the tradition of 'confessions'. She is especially looking at the dynamics of power that determine who can lay claim to a truthful narrative, or inhabit a subject position from which to tell the truth.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁶ Shari Benstock (1988), 'Authorizing the Autobiographical.' In *The Private Self*, pp. 10-33; p. 19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

However, the power of discourse can be subverted by the playful use of language: 'The very act of confessing seems almost to conspire against the one bound to tell the truth. In telling the *truth*, autobiographers usually narrate, and thereby shift the emphasis to *telling* the truth.'⁶⁸ By writing autobiography, women can disturb the discourses of truth and identity by experimenting with shifting selves and different names (for example, Audre Lorde uses several renaming strategies in *Zami*). Instead of the tragically split I of Benstock's autobiographer, Gilmore develops a complex triangulated autobiographical I that evolves out of the interactions between the I that lived, the I in the text, and the I that writes. For her, the fluid self described in *The Woman Warrior* is not a sign of a female identity defined in relation to others, but demonstrates how 'the I is situated in multiple identity constructions at once and functions in a range of representational politics'⁶⁹ These examples go to show that the autobiographies themselves—and *Zami* and *The Woman Warrior* have been used again and again to shore up very different ways of theorising autobiography—can be read in many different ways. On the one hand, the critic can privilege their overtly feminist agenda that leads them to portray the suppression of women or to reclaim a female ancestry and close connection to the mother. On the other hand, she can privilege the ways in which the autobiographical I is shown as constructed by a complex set of circumstances,

⁶⁸ Leigh Gilmore (1994) *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 121 (her italics).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

called into question altogether or reshaped by a playful strategy of renaming.

Zami and *The Woman Warrior* can be read on both these levels.

iii. Difference

However, there is also a strand of feminist theorising that moves away from the preoccupation with the ways in which the gendered self or subject position is constructed in discourse. It goes on to explore the ways in which differences—mostly in race, class or sexuality—interact with gender and shape the life that is told in autobiography. These differences are played out not only in the process of writing, but in the ‘lived life’ of the autobiographer. On the other hand, the attempt to posit a genre and tradition of ‘women’s autobiography’ becomes embroiled in debates within feminist theory about the usefulness of the category ‘women’ that might mask a hegemonic, white, heterosexual, middle class bias. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck argue that to elide the ‘bio’ within autobiography is to ‘ignore the crucial referentiality of class, race and sexual orientation.’⁷⁰ In a similar vein, Susan Bell and Marilyn Yalom, in the introduction to their collection *Revealing Lives*, criticise those postmodern theorists of autobiography who assume that autobiography is governed by language and discourse alone, without referring to a lived life. In their view, ‘autobiography and biography ... presuppose the factual data of a lived existence, if only to provide the nest from which the author’s imagination and

⁷⁰ Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (1988) ‘Introduction.’ In: *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-18, p. 13.

interpretation may take flight.’⁷¹ Liz Stanley, in *The Auto/Biographical I*, again insists that one should explore the ‘crucial differences that “life” reveals between women on grounds of class, race, and sexual orientation.’⁷² She also criticises the use of highly literary writers’ autobiographies to form a new, exclusionary canon as the base for theory of autobiography, casting the net much wider to include ‘mundane’ kinds of life-writing, like letters and diaries, as well. For Stanley, women’s autobiographical selves should be portrayed as relational, but she formulates this as a prescriptive, not a descriptive argument. An ‘anti-spotlight stance’ that relates the autobiographical I to other people is crucial for feminist auto/biography,⁷³ but this is not because a woman’s sense of self is psychologically more fluid than a man’s but because ‘in feminist and cultural political terms, people’s lives and behaviours make considerably more sense when they are located through their participation in a range of overlapping social groups.’⁷⁴ The lived life of the autobiographers, in this strand of theorising, is inextricably tied to the differences in class, race and sexuality that make it problematic to speak of ‘women’s autobiography’ in the first place.

⁷¹ Susan G. Bell and Marilyn Yalom (1990) ‘Introduction.’ In: Susan G. Bell and Marilyn Yalom, eds. *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender*. Albany: New York State University Press, pp. 1-11; p. 2.

⁷² Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p. 97.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 253. Stanley works with the concept of the auto/biographical, arguing that the boundary between (objective) biography and (subjective) autobiography is an artificial one: every autobiography is also the biography of other people; while every biography is shaped by the life of the biographer, who should include autobiographical elements in the biography.

These concerns have fed into what has been an ongoing interest in the connections between class and gender in working-class women's autobiography. Regina Gagnier, writing on nineteenth century working-class autobiography and gender, describes the pitfalls of middle-class concepts of 'the subject'. Male working-class autobiographers who are not part of a working-class community or radical movement tend to try to emulate this dominant discourse of autobiography and its freely acting subject and end up viewing themselves as a 'failure'. Women autobiographers, on the other hand (who are mostly isolated from political discourse and workers' movements) are even more prone to buy into middle-class literary models in their feminine version of romance, marriage and family.⁷⁵ Carolyn Steedman, in *Landscape for a Good Woman*, contests a dominant discourse of autobiography that does not include the stories of 'the inhabitants of the long streets.'⁷⁶ However, among those who do write about working-class experience, there is a tendency to ignore the experiences of girls and women, and to construct an ideal type of working-class life: 'the fixed townscapes of Northampton and Leeds ... show endless streets of houses, where mothers who don't go to work order the domestic day, ... where men are masters.'⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p. 9.

⁷⁵ Regina Gagnier ([1990] 1999) 'The Literary Standard: Working-Class Autobiography and Gender.' In: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, pp. 264-75.

⁷⁶ Carolyn Steedman (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman*. London: Virago, p. 16.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Other critics have looked at the importance of autobiographical forms for everyday life. The contributors to *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*⁷⁸ and *The Uses of Autobiography*⁷⁹ describe the ways in which autobiographical narratives tie in with or oppose the expectations of institutions like the church confessional, the psychoanalyst's practice, or the medical establishment. Sidonie Smith, in *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*,⁸⁰ addresses the complex interaction between 'life' and 'text' by tracing the implications of embodiment for the autobiographical self, and the autobiographer's use of the body for 'talking back' to a culture that links the female body to the polluted and grotesque.

The significance of 'race' for women's autobiographical narratives has remained an important issue for feminist theory of autobiography. I have already mentioned Joanne Braxton who, in *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, had mapped a rich tradition of black women's autobiographical writing. Françoise Lionnet, in *Autobiographical Voices*, is more interested in the intermingling of traditions from different sources. She introduces the concept of *métissage*, the 'braiding' of narratives that contests the purity of stories together with the assumed purity of 'race'.⁸¹ Likewise, the

⁷⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. (1996) *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁷⁹ Julia Swindells, ed. (1995) *The Uses of Autobiography*. London: Taylor & Francis.

⁸⁰ See Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*.

⁸¹ Françoise Lionnet (1989) *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

contributors to Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's collection *De/Colonizing the Subject* introduce the concept of the (post)colonial as a starting point for a different theory of autobiography.⁸² Gillian Whitlock reads women's autobiographies from a postcolonial and Foucauldian angle, describing the complex negotiations for female subject positions going on throughout the empire. She is looking for connections between autobiographical writings of freed slaves and settlers, the 'daughters of Britannia' and black writers in diaspora.⁸³

Another concern that emerged recently is that of autobiographies of trauma, that is, 'the writing of illness narratives as both "cure" and consolation ... a body of literature that is only beginning to be read ...'.⁸⁴ Suzette Henke's *Shattered Subjects* considers autobiographies of trauma as public, political testimonies of abuse and suffering and as at the same time a vehicle for heroic self-invention, for constructing oneself anew as whole.⁸⁵ Susanna Egan reads autobiographies of crisis as a space in which the autobiographical self interacts with others.⁸⁶ Moreover, the autobiography of trauma is perhaps a genre where the feminist critic of autobiography has to leave the field of 'autobiography' altogether to look at it from the margins, as Leigh Gilmore argues in her paper

⁸² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. (1992) *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸³ Gillian Whitlock (2000) *The Intimate Empire*. London: Cassell.

⁸⁴ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p. 40.

⁸⁵ Suzette Henke (1998) *Shattered Subjects*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

on autobiographical limit-cases, trauma and self-representation. Examining the current boom in memoirs of trauma and the implications of juristic squabbles and character-assassination by the media that publishing a memoir of trauma and abuse often entails, Gilmore contends that authors who situate themselves at the limits of autobiography can shed light on the politics of identity and representation involved in autobiography itself.⁸⁷

In this admittedly simplified and elliptic overview (so much has now been written on autobiography that, even if I could lay my hands on all of it, the reading would exceed the time-limit of a doctoral thesis) it seems as if feminist theory of autobiography has moved in a spiral: from staking a claim to a distinctly recognisable women's autobiography where the subject is related to others, through a phase of concern with positing and contesting the female subject and then back to an emphasis on the lived life of women and the connections between the autobiographer and other people or diverse communities. However, this is, of course, not a simple return: on the one hand, there is no going back to a unified 'women's experience'. Even in Friedman's article, the use of African- and Chinese-American autobiographies and the slave narrative as a model had sat uneasily with her implicit argument that the basic experiences of oppression and childrearing, motherhood and

⁸⁶ See Susanna Egan (1999) *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

⁸⁷ Leigh Gilmore (2000) 'Limit-Cases, Trauma, and Self-Representation'. Unpublished conference paper, 'Autobiography and Changing Identities', Vancouver, July 2000.

daughterhood are the same for all women. It is precisely the lived life of the autobiographer that puts her into a position of difference (for example, Audre Lorde as a black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two).⁸⁸ On the other hand, there is a growing acknowledgement that all autobiography is fragmented, a fragmentation masked by the way in which autobiographies have been read and used for political purposes, thus upholding the fictitious autonomous male subject. In Susanna Egan's words:

... the contemporary autobiographer turns with great frequency to double voicing, double vision ... developing linguistic strategies that enable plural voices and that contain the oral and written within each other, these autobiographers begin from positions that are politically weak and from those that are privileged, and are transformed by the process.⁸⁹

And perhaps, as Leigh Gilmore had suggested, feminists might want to not only stop trying to define 'women's autobiography', but also to look at the specific interaction between texts that situate themselves as autobiography and those that do not.

4. Placing Myself on the Map

Leigh Gilmore has described the theory of autobiography as a 'map for getting lost.'⁹⁰ In the next few pages, I would like to nevertheless try to situate my

⁸⁸ Audre Lorde (1984 [1996]) 'Sister Outsider.' In: *The Audre Lorde Compendium*. London: Pandora, p. 162.

⁸⁹ Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk*, p. 25.

⁹⁰ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, p. 1.

project on the map of feminist theory of autobiography I have charted above. The theoretical strand I would want to place myself in is the third one concerned with 'difference'. This project touches on many of the concerns outlined there, for example, that of the female body, and the effect of trauma on women's autobiography. Though the issues of selfhood and Otherness will also be explored, I believe that it is useful to connect the difference between self and Other to a host of other differences, gender being only one of them. As stated above, the contribution I hope to bring to the field is the connection between myth and autobiography, and the insights it generates. Aligning autobiography with myth allows me to keep it suspended between the opposite poles of life and art, past and present, the individual and the communal, while at the same time analysing the complex relations between them.⁹¹ In my MA dissertation, I had argued that aligning autobiography to mythmaking and storytelling might be a way out of the dilemma of either insisting that the autobiographical I is shaped by writing and language alone or laying claim to a 'life', faithfully conveyed by the text and maybe even comprising authentic, specifically female, experience. Autobiography as mythmaking means that the life can be creatively transformed into a new story, a work of art, in a way

⁹¹ I am bracketing Freudian or Jungian approaches to autobiography which, of course, see the self as connected to mythical patterns and characters. However, I believe that these approaches neglect the purposeful 'mythmaking' engaged in by the autobiographers: because, in psychoanalysis or Jungian psychology, myths reflect the eternal laws of the psyche and its development, one could say that it is the myth that makes the author/narrator, not the other way round.

similar to Susanna Egan's belief that the autobiographer is 'unable to lift anything from life and into art without transforming it.'⁹²

Now, that 'text-based' and 'life-based' approaches do not seem to be mutually exclusive any more, I have become more interested in the actual ways in which the historical and the textual self interact. For this, I have drawn on theories of myth and narrative. Mostly, myth is seen as a narrative that upholds the self (or the nation) and creates its continuity, whereas the disruptions come from outside the myth, or help to transcend it, like Donna Haraway's cyborg who does not need a myth of origin.⁹³ Elaborating on the close connection between autobiography and myth could be a way of contesting this. I suggest that the disruptions and the confrontations with Otherness do not only happen outside of narrative, but also within the narrative itself. While it is true that narrative is used as a means of connection—between the narrator's own stories and other people's, her own memories and other people's, the past and the present, home and diaspora, mother and daughter—this connection is only made possible by a split from home, the mother, and the culture of origin. Sometimes the narrative doubles up on itself, goes astray or nowhere, or turns the narrator, like Lot's wife, into a pillar of salt, transfixed by gazing at the past.

⁹² Susanna Egan, 'Patterns of Experience in Autobiography', quoted in Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses*, p. 237.

⁹³ See Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto'.

In the following, I will be working, as Elizabeth Grosz did in *Volatile Bodies*, partly from ‘the inside out’ and partly from ‘the outside in’.⁹⁴ In the chapters on embodiment, the past, and first memories, I will mainly address the problem of selfhood within the autobiographical origin myth in a way that sees selfhood as always embroiled with Otherness. In the chapters on psychoanalysis and on diaspora, I will connect this view with the myth of origin as offering a possibility to make connections across time and space, in a way that does not coerce multiple starting-points into a single narrative, but does, like Kingston’s myth of Fa Mu Lan, leave room for paradoxes.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Grosz (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. xii-xiii.

Whose history of the body is being written? What specific body does the autobiographical subject claim in her text? ... Does the body drop away as a location of autobiographical identity, or does the speaker insist on its founding identification? ... How is the body the performative boundary between inner and outer, the subject and the world?

(Sidonie Smith)¹

Chapter Three

Women's Autobiography and the Female Body

1. Becoming A Woman: Women Writers' Autobiographies and Embodiment

Perhaps the most crucial origin story for the autobiographies considered here is of becoming 'a woman', in keeping with Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'² For de Beauvoir, 'a woman' is something one is, a body that has the capacity to reproduce. But on the other hand, a woman is something one becomes through a process of socialisation that entails accepting one's destiny as circumscribed by the female body: by its weakness compared to the male body, and its potential to bear children. According to de Beauvoir, this is not due to an innate sexual difference, but to the meaning that is assigned to female bodies in a society characterised by gender inequality. Elizabeth Grosz has divided feminist theories of the body into three groups: the egalitarian feminists who distinguish between a sexually neutral mind and a sexually specific body and see female biology as either an obstacle to be overcome, or a special means of access to the natural; the social constructionists who uphold the divide between

¹ Sidonie Smith (1993) *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 23.

² Simone de Beauvoir (1949 [1997]) *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage, p. 295.

a fixed biological sex and a socially imposed gender that needs to be changed; and the 'sexual difference' theorists who challenge the sex/gender divide and see the body itself as a social and discursive object.³ Grosz argues that Simone de Beauvoir employs an egalitarian model where 'the female body limits women's capacity for equality and transcendence, it is a hindrance to be overcome ... if equality is to be attained.'⁴ However, I would like to argue that de Beauvoir's description of the menstruating girl cuts across the divide between the three: the girl's fate is determined by her body as well as by the imposition of meaning on her body:

it is the social context that makes menstruation a curse ... it is because femininity signifies alterity and inferiority that its manifestation is met with shame. ... The set fate that up to now weighed upon her indistinctly and from without is now crouching in her belly; there is no escape; she feels she is caught.⁵

This is a powerful description of how the meaning imposed on the body does not only determine how the archetypal girl described here is seen by others, but also how she sees herself, or, more precisely, how she sees the imposed 'fate' as contained within her own body. The consequence of this is that the girl's own perception of her body is directly affected. In de Beauvoir's text, the experience of being embodied causes the neat sex-gender divide to break down:

³ Elizabeth Grosz (1994) *Volatile Bodies. Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 15-19.

⁴ Ibid., p. 15. I think that *The Second Sex*, although usually seen as the founding text for feminist social constructionism, strangely veers between optimistic assertions that, in an equal society, girls and women could take pride in their bodies, and the pessimistic insistence on 'nature' and 'destiny' in the powerful, empathetic biography of 'her', the fictitious archetypal girl that is trapped in her own body and forced to accept 'being a woman' like a sentence of life imprisonment.

it is impossible to separate the body itself from the meaning imposed on it from the outside. The young girl feels that her own body comes to incorporate, 'crouching in her belly', the repressive system she is caught up in. After this realisation, her body can never be the same again. If one reads the autobiographies discussed here with Simone de Beauvoir's theory in mind—and I believe that there is a close fit between the Beauvoir's arguments and events described within the autobiographies because both, for the main part, describe the socialisation of Western girls in the 1940s and 1950s—one finds that the autobiographers describe this process of 'becoming a woman'. Several autobiographers stress the importance of the first menstruation and the impact of socially constructed femininity that determines the ambivalence with which their mothers react: with relief, because the daughter's reproductive functions are intact, and with dread, because of the possibility of illegitimate pregnancy.

However, the meanings imposed on the female body might also have a direct effect on women writers' use of the genre of autobiography. Mary and Kenneth Gergen argue, in their analysis of sixteen popular American autobiographies published between 1985 and 1990, that there are marked differences between men and women autobiographers in the degree to which their autobiographical selves are described as embodied. They found that male autobiographers tended to view themselves as beings whose bodies were 'considered a machine possession, and, like one's automobile, its normal operation should enable one

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 340.

to get on with the business of life.’⁶ In contrast, the women autobiographers tended to view their selves as intricately enmeshed with their bodies, in accordance with the popular ‘patriarchal and misogynist assumptions about the female body as somehow more natural’.⁷ However, this close link between self and body seemed to make them more vulnerable: ‘The discourse of embodiment sets the stage for deep unsettlement during puberty, for self-mutilation during periods of disappointment, and for a more profound sense of ageing in later years.’⁸ This presents women autobiographers with a dilemma Sidonie Smith (and others) have described: women are seen as tied to materiality, serving as the material Other in order to uphold the illusion of a disembodied masculine self that is pure reason. At the same time, the flip-side of this notion is the ideal of the disembodied, ethereal woman that should not have bodily needs at all that was especially powerful during the nineteenth century.⁹ For a avowedly feminist autobiographer engaging with these issues, there are two possible strategies to deal with the essentialist conflation between ‘woman’ and ‘body’ and the simultaneous tabooing of women’s bodies: she can maintain the position of the disembodied subject; or she can reclaim the

⁶ Mary and Kenneth Gergen (1993) ‘Autobiographies and the Shaping of Gendered Lives.’ In Nikolas Coupland and Jon F. Nussbaum, eds., *Discourse and Lifespan Identity*. London: Sage, pp. 28-54; pp. 39-40.

⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 15.

⁸ Mary and Kenneth Gergen, ‘Autobiographies and the Shaping of Gendered Lives’, p. 51

⁹ ‘To the extent that woman represses the body ... she positions herself as a proper lady who surmounts her negative identification with the body through selflessness. ... These angels take shape through the discourses of various kinds of contaminated women’ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, pp. 16-7.

See also Shirley Neuman, ‘Autobiography and Mother’s Bodies’, on the twofold way in which the body of the mother is repressed within anthropological and psychoanalytic theories: by making her seem pure matter and emphasising that her only purpose is her product (the child) and by constructing them as ‘self-sacrificing and selfless and, therefore, as without embodied desire or knowledge’ Shirley Newman (1992) “‘Your Past ... Your Future’”. *Autobiography and Mothers’ Bodies*. In: Barry Rutland, ed. *Genre, Trope, Gender: Critical Essays*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, pp. 53-86; p. 53.

body by making a point of relating pleasurable and painful bodily experiences, and especially the discrimination and objectification levelled at the protagonist because of her female body. Sidonie Smith uses Isak Dinesen's short story *The Blank Page* in order to show how autobiographical storytelling seems to become possible for women once the essentialised body is left behind:

Out of this silence erupts women's autobiographical storytelling since the possibilities of storytelling will proliferate with the absence of the body's mark. Female sexuality and textuality herein defy the inherited frame of an essentialized embodiment.¹⁰

However, this removal of 'the body's mark' can result in a kind of literary suicide. Elisabeth Bronfen sees suicide, literary and physical, as one, sometimes the only, available way of writing autobiography for women, because they use the one signifier they have left, their body. This results in a 'suicidal autobiography', where 'self-textualisation engenders a form of self-obliteration while at the same time the suicide generates texts and constructs the dead self as author.'¹¹ The drawbacks of this strategy—doing away with one's own body in an attempt to deconstruct the essentialist conflation of woman and body—are clear: the autobiographer, in avoiding being perceived as only a body, is caught up in the complementary essentialist assumption of women's ethereal, bodiless nature. This assumption can be (and, before second wave feminism arrived in the seventies, definitely was) an obstacle to women's

¹⁰ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*, p. 3.

¹¹ Elisabeth Bronfen (1992) *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 157. Bronfen also describes the simultaneous use of woman as the 'good Other' that is already dead and ethereal and the 'bad Other' that is alive, material and therefore tainted with mortality.

autobiographical writing, because it places an effective taboo on women relating their bodily experiences. Virginia Woolf writes, in 1941, to Ethel Smyth:

I was thinking the other night that there's never been a woman's autobiography ... Chastity and modesty I suppose have been the reason. ... Now why shouldn't you be not only the first woman to write an opera, but equally the first to tell the truth about herself? Isn't the great artist the only person to tell the truth? I should like an analysis of your sex life. As Rousseau did his.¹²

However, a feminist appropriation of bodily experience can have some drawbacks as well. Many women autobiographers structure their autobiographies around the changes of the female body - menstruation, first sexual experiences, childbirth, menopause. In doing so, autobiographers are in danger of chaining themselves to what Sidonie Smith, in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, has called the 'script of femininity': 'a life cycle tied to biological phenomena and the uses to which these phenomena are put: birth, menarche, marriage, childbirth, menopause, widowhood.'¹³ This also incurs the danger of essentialising the female body, of stressing the bodily experiences common to all women and thereby obliterating differences, glossing over the fact that the meanings imposed on the body can be very different in different groups and cultures. Moreover, as mentioned before, the view that there is a natural body (sex) onto which meaning is then projected (gender) has been

¹² Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, eds. (1980) *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* Vol. VI. London: Hogarth Press, p. 453.

challenged. Judith Butler has argued that the surface of the body itself is shaped and regulated by prohibitive discourses, and that especially the gendered body is maintained as a performance.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body, or rather, bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products ... of the very social constitution of nature itself.¹⁵

Seen from this perspective, autobiographical writing can be a tool to make visible the manifold discourses into which the body is placed, or by which it is produced. However, autobiography describes as well the ways in which embodiment is experienced in more complex ways than the simple assumption of 'women's experience'. Sidonie Smith writes:

Bearing multiple marks of location, bodies position the autobiographical subject at the nexus of culturally specific experiences, of gender, race, sexual orientation, and health among them. ... The very complexity of this experientially based history can be used to challenge, disturb, and displace the neat categorisations (and fragmentation/unification) of bodies.¹⁶

The question of the relationship between 'bodily experience' and autobiography is a fundamental one. As Sidonie Smith argues, 'the autobiographical subject carries a history of the body with her as she negotiates

¹³ Sidonie Smith (1987) *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 54.

¹⁴ See Judith Butler (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, p. 136: 'acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body ... the gendered body ... has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.'

¹⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. x.

the autobiographical “I”, for autobiographical practice is one of those cultural occasions when the history of the body intersects the deployment of subjectivity.’¹⁷ I believe that the ‘history of the body’ of the autobiographer is important for the reader of the autobiography as well. On the one hand, because the reader can only access the autobiography as a text, the powerful effect the related bodily experiences have on the reader is dependent on their skillful description in language. On the other hand, their effect on the reader is also dependent on the knowledge that there is a ‘real’ body behind the text to which the things related actually happened. I have attempted to answer the thorny question of ‘does it matter if it really happened’ by referring to the traditions of storytelling which uses the lived life as material to create something fundamentally different. However, it might also be the case that relating bodily experiences creates a kind of ‘truth-effect’.¹⁸ Although it seems to be almost impossible to communicate how the body, especially the body in pain, feels to someone who does not feel the same,¹⁹ an artful evocation of these feelings can create a direct impression on the reader through the reader’s identification with her, her ‘sympathetic’ pain of imagining these things happening to her own body. I’d like to argue that this ‘truth-effect’ is used, especially by Audre Lorde and Dorothy Allison, to make a contribution to a feminist politics of the body

¹⁶ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*, p. 130.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 22-3.

¹⁸ John Beverley has used the term ‘truth-effect’ in order to describe the ways in which a text (South American political activists’ *testimonios*) can seem to contain undiluted raw experience, although it is formed from a narrative told to an interlocutor and then translated, edited and printed as a book or pamphlet. See John Beverley (1992) ‘The Margin at the Centre. On *Testimonio*.’ In: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 91-114.

by using the impact of ‘this happened to my body’ (the pain of beatings, rape or abortion) in order to stress the need to change a society where these things happen to women’s bodies.²⁰

In order to contribute to a feminist politics of the body the origin stories need to include what happened to the autobiographers’ bodies as well as the different aspects of femininity or sexuality they developed or resisted. In doing that, the autobiographers also reflect on the views on female bodies prevalent in the society, community and family they came from. I hope to show that, within the autobiographies, there are several links between ‘body’ and ‘text’: at the most simple level, an autobiography is a text that speaks about an embodied self.

However, as many feminists have argued, the body, and especially the female body, can be seen as a ‘text’ to be read.²¹ Christa Wolf attempts to read the protagonist’s and the narrator’s bodily symptoms and reactions as clues to the inner feelings to which she has no conscious access. Several of the autobiographers try to fuse ‘body’ and ‘text’ in various ways: Christa Wolf’s narrator places great importance on her ‘writing hand’ that sometimes is forced

¹⁹ ‘Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through resistance to language’. Elaine Scarry (1985) *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

²⁰ Chantal Zabus argues that, in the case of autobiographies by women who endured genital mutilation, the public account of bodily pain is addressed to an imaginary community of women united by their suffering. (Chantal Zabus (1999) ‘Writing Women’s Rites: Excision in Postcolonial Literature’. Unpublished conference paper, ‘Women and the Millenium: Gender, Culture and Globalisation.’ University of Warwick, July 1999.

²¹ See for example, Susan Bordo’s description as the female body as ‘the text of femininity’: ‘the bodies of disordered women ... offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter—a text that insists ... that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender.’ Susan Bordo (1993 [1997]) ‘The Reproduction of Femininity.’ In: Katie Conboy et al., eds. *Writing On the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 90-110; p. 92.

to turn against herself, or her family,²² and Maxine Hong Kingston uses the image of words tattooed on her heroine's back. In a different vein, Maureen Duffy's narrator links her mother's body to the discourse of TB by using graphic descriptions of the deprivation that causes or exacerbates her suffering as well as the literary-romantic imagery of consumption.

Although the autobiographers, on the one hand, describe how bodies are constructed and shaped by the discourses of the surrounding culture or cultures, they also explore the body's potential of 'talking back', where the body can become 'a source of subversive practice, a potentially emancipatory vehicle for autobiographical practice.'²³ Two strands of feminist thinking on the body can be brought to bear on the autobiographies: on the one hand, a constructionist stance influenced by de Beauvoir, or later by Foucault, where the body is acted upon, inscribed or made intelligible by prescriptive discourses; and on the other hand, a stance that believes that women's articulation of bodily experiences can contradict and disrupt the metaphors and narratives of women's bodies used by the medical and academic 'malestream' establishment.²⁴ The ways in which the protagonists become women are shaped by the cultures, families and the

²² For example, the narrator dreams that her right hand, the 'writing hand' is skillfully amputated and explains this dream as an enactment of the proverb that the hand that is raised against father or mother will wither and die (*Kindheitsmuster*, p. 33).

²³ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*, pp. 20, 22. A fictional, utopian example of the body's capacity to 'talk back' and break the discursive restrictions imposed on it is the story of escape from a Foucauldian panopticon women's prison in Angela Carter's (1984 [1994]) *Nights at the Circus*. London: Vintage, p. 217: 'Contact was effected, first by illicit touch and glance, and then by illicit notes, or, if either guard or inmate turned out to be illiterate, by drawings ... in blood, both menstrual and venous, even in excrement ... The notes, the drawings, the caresses, the glances—all said, in various ways, "if only", and "I long..." ... So it was an army of lovers who finally rose up ...'.

²⁴ See, for example, Emily Martin (1989) *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

societies at large they grow up in, their bodies fenced in by regulations and cautionary tales. However, Maxine Hong Kingston and Audre Lorde, while attempting to reinvent powerful ancestresses, also rely on liberating countertraditions of the female body within their cultures of origin. Moreover, the body comes to stand for a reality beyond social construction, a power that can overthrow the autobiographical self's intentions and that, as Dorothy Allison puts it, 'surprises you with desire.' (*Skin*, p. 80) Moreover, in a more psychoanalytic vein, the body can become the site of truth that is situated within the unconscious, a truth that the autobiographical self is not prepared to face until it breaks through in the form of a psychosomatic illness. In the following pages, I will trace the imagery of the body through several issues that provide strong links between the autobiographies: that of bodily felt and expressed anger; of embodied language; that of sex and sexuality; that of the markers of 'race' and different cultural techniques of the body and that of illness and pain.

2. Anger

Christa Wolf describes the birth of Nelly's little brother as the root of a strange mixture of aggression, lust, guilt and fear she often feels. The child's hatred of him, culminating in a fight where she dislocates his arm, is retrospectively seen as the wish to murder him, because she wants to keep all of her mother's love for herself.

She hadn't come any closer to answering the burning question: Does love really not get one bit smaller if you share it out between you? Silly girl, the mother says, I have enough love for both you and your little brother. But

then there wasn't enough butter in their shop for everybody: Lieselotte
Bornow ate marg sandwiches. (*Kindheitsmuster*, p. 18)

Because the expression of anger gives rise to a feeling of guilt, this suppressed aggression leaves a lasting bodily trace. The narrator asks herself: 'Why are, for this child, shock and triumph, lust and fear so intimately fused that nothing in the world, no chemical laboratory and surely no analysis of the soul will ever be able to ever separate them again?' (p. 13) This is a psychoanalytically informed view on the connection between aggression (hate of the siblings) and emergence of individuality: the narrator describes how the child says 'I' for the first time shortly after her brother is born, and saying 'I' is infused with a very similar mixture of lust and fear.²⁵ The connection between aggression and guilt is then reinforced in a later episode, where the child picks a fight with a bully boy, and her satisfaction of being able to hit back is followed by a feeling of guilt: not only has she lost the fight, but she has given in to her aggression and become like him (p. 120). According to Simone de Beauvoir, it is a girl's realisation that her body is weaker than that of a boy that triggers her acceptance of passive femininity.²⁶ However, in this episode, the taboo on aggression for a girl is so strong that even her victory would be turned into a defeat. Virginia Woolf, in *A Sketch of the Past*, describes a similar experience:

²⁵ See Christel Zahlmann (1986) *Christa Wolfs Reise ins Tertiär* [Christa Wolf's Return to the Tertiary Era]. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann. (The title refers to a friend's comment to the narrator that the Third Reich might as well be the Tertiary Era). Zahlmann, using a Kleinian framework, interprets the child's constitution of self as an act of aggression.

²⁶ 'Against any insult, the male has recourse to his fists ... he is himself at the heart of his subjectivity ... One woman told me she had fiercely denied her physical weakness though she knew better ... When she had become aware of how weak she really was, she lost most of her assurance; this began her evolution towards femininity in which she assumed her passivity and accepted dependency.' (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp. 354-55).

I was fighting with Thoby on the lawn. We were pommelling each other with fists. Just as I raised my fist to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. ... I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed. (p. 71)

This reads like a corroboration for the feminist argument that the taboo on aggression for girls causes the impulse to be turned inward, resulting in a feeling of numbness and depression. However, the authors of *Emotion and Gender* argue that the inability to act that is described (and thereby pathologised) as depression is, in fact, a reaction to women's, and children's, real powerlessness. 'In situations where frustration, impotence and powerlessness lead to anger, we cannot act because action is denied us.'²⁷ However, in *Kindheitsmuster*, it is a mixture of the feeling of powerlessness and displaced aggression that is seen to lead to the child's succumbing to the lure of National Socialism. Wolf describes the child's enthusiasm for Hitler, which is felt bodily as well:

The Führer was a sweet tightness in her stomach and a sweet lump in her throat ... Nelly had absorbed the melody of this great chorus of voices that had worked itself up from many little cries to one enormous cry ... Even though she was a bit afraid, she wanted to hear this cry, from herself as well. Wanted to know how you could cry out and how you could feel at one with everybody when you saw The Führer. (pp. 47-8)

²⁷ June Crawford et al. (1992) *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning from Memory*. London: Sage, p. 174.

Christel Zahlmann, who interprets *Kindheitsmuster* within the framework of Kleinian psychoanalysis, sees this scene as a description of a regressive wish to become one with the mother as well as a reversal of powerlessness into a collective fantasy of omnipotence.²⁸ Christa Wolf's view on anger and the body partly emphasises the naturalness of these feelings as part and parcel of normal child development, but partly, in introducing the child's desire for the Führer, makes them seem monstrous. The child's own body has become a traitor; not because it is somehow inadequate or weaker than a boy's, but because the connections linking anger, fear, guilt and desire laid down through the experience of impotent anger in early childhood make her susceptible to Nazism.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the expression of anger becomes connected with the body as well as with the act of writing. The narrator, who is full of anger towards the misogyny she encounters from the Chinese community and the racism she encounters trying to make a living in America, interweaves and contrasts her own story with that of the heroine of a Chinese ballad, Fa Mu Lan, who avenges the wrongs done to her family. In Maxine Hong Kingston's version of the myth, her father painfully carves and tattoos these wrongs on her back, so that they are literally imprinted on her body. However, when she kills the enemy in the end, the evil baron quotes the sayings the girl Maxine heard from the males in her own family: 'Girls are maggots in the rice'. After showing him her scarred back ('You've done this. You are responsible for

²⁸ See Christel Zahlmann, *Christa Wolfs Reise ins Tertiär*.

this') she beheads him. (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 46) The legend, where the heroine fights for her family, who had 'carved their names and address on me, and I would come back' (p. 40) is turned around and used against her family by the narrator. However, this power-fantasy does not resolve the protagonist's impotent anger at racist American bosses: 'If I took the sword, which my hatred surely must have forged out of the air, and gutted him' (p. 50)

In Wolf's as well as Kingston's texts, anger is perceived as affecting the body directly, and anger, or the suppression of it, shapes patterns of emotions for the child or the adult narrator, triggers feelings of guilt, depression or powerlessness as well as a heady mixture of fear and excitement. For Kingston, the only way to give an outlet to this anger that is productive rather than destructive, is to express it in language:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. ... What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families'. The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin. (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 53)

The 'words at our backs' evoke the idea of a Foucauldian body totally imprinted by discourse; however, since the words that mark the swordswoman's body (the wrongs done to her family) are also the wrongs done to the narrator by her family as well as others, she can, by transferring them onto the page, exact her revenge. As Eva Hoffman, argues, reflecting on her

own difficulties of expression in a foreign language and comparing it with the repetitive insults poor black youths shout at each other in her neighbourhood: 'anger can be borne—it can even be satisfying, if it can gather into words and explode in a storm, or a rapier-sharp attack. But without this means of ventilation, it only turns back inward, building and swirling like a head of steam.' (*Lost in Translation*, p. 124). In *The Woman Warrior*, the anger is gathered into words as well; however, the trajectory is not only from a bodily felt anger to words that somehow transcend or cancel out the body. Through the metaphor of the 'words at her back', the narrator endeavours to connect the language of revenge intimately to her own body.²⁹

3. Sexuality

The double approach towards the body as constructed and rebellious is most obvious in reflections on sex and sexuality. Sexuality is described as something that is on the one hand produced, shaped by the culture the protagonist grew up in, and personal history and experience. Maureen Duffy connects these two discourses by describing the protagonist's autoerotic fantasies: 'Yet I knew all about the body and its demands, and how to satisfy them while images of the rape of the Italian princess ... by the German commander or the story of the Sabine women passed through my head' (*That's How it Was*, p. 192). The seemingly natural presence of 'the body and its demands' is contrasted by the imagery of the fantasies derived from pulp literature and school texts. The

²⁹ In an interview with Laura Skandera-Trombley, Kingston comments on the strong emotions the narrator's anger evoked in readers of *The Woman Warrior*: 'if you can't put it [the anger] into a book, where can you put it?' Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (1998) 'Interview

feminist film critic Kaja Silverman dismisses notions that the natural instincts of the body could be used as a means of women's liberation. She argues that the political aim of 're-writing the body' should be 'the transformation of the discursive conditions under which women live their corporeality, rather than the liberation of a pre-discursive sexuality.'³⁰ However, within the autobiographies, 'discursive' and 'pre-discursive' sexuality enmesh for the narrators. For Eva Hoffman, sexuality is perceived as a part of growing up naturally in Poland, evolving from 'embrac[ing], kiss[ing] and roll[ing] around on the floor' (p. 43) with one's childhood friend, where the only hazard is getting pregnant, in which case 'the boyfriend will surely vanish.' (p. 55) In 1950s America, sex is highly ritualised, shaped by the rigid behaviour codes of dating and parties that govern how much bodily contact a girl can allow in a given situation without gaining a 'fast' reputation. Holding this against her nostalgic recollections of adolescence in Poland, the narrator perceives 'the artifice in the seemingly spontaneous.' There is 'a discomfort in the air, a lack of ease between the boys and girls, in which this early sexuality is converted not into friendliness but into coy sexiness. ... This is a sad comedown from Marek and the packs of boys and girls I ran with in Cracow' (pp. 130-31)

In Lorde's, Allison's and Duffy's texts, the most pervasive way in which the autobiographical selves' sexuality is shaped is the connection between sex and danger, especially the danger of becoming pregnant. Several of the

with Maxine Hong Kingston.' In: Laura Skandera-Trombley, ed. *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*. New York: G. K. Hall, pp. 33-50; p. 40.

³⁰ Kaja Silverman (1988) *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 146.

autobiographies feature a 'first menstruation' episode, where the mother stresses that now her daughter must protect herself. In *Kindheitsmuster*, Nelly tells her mother 'like a little hypocrite' what is happening as if she did not know already, and her mother warns her to 'look out for herself and keep herself clean' (p. 199). In *Zami* there is a similar scene, an 'old and elaborate dance' where Audre's mother

discovers finally, through a stain on the toilet seat left there on purpose by me as a mute announcement, what has taken place, she scolds, 'Why didn't you tell me about all of this, now? It's nothing to get upset over, you are a woman, not a child anymore. ... This means from now on you better watch your step and not be so friendly with every Tom, Dick or Harry ...' (pp. 61-2)

The harshest version of this coming of age ritual is in *The Woman Warrior*, where the narrator's mother tells her the story of No Name Woman, who became pregnant, was ostracised by the other villagers, and drowned herself and the child in the family well. 'Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. ... The villagers are watchful.' (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 13)

The pervading feature in these episodes is the double bind of the necessity to warn the daughter about pregnancy without having to mention sex, so that the daughters are left with a vague sense of dread. However, both Lorde and Kingston counter the tabooing of menstruation by the protagonist's mother by

linking menstruation with acquiring knowledge, drawing on different traditions in China and the Caribbean: in *Zami*, the first menstruation is connected to the traditional Caribbean mortar the girl uses on that day in a new, sensuous way, and the ‘breadfruit smell’ of the blood is ‘secretly, utterly delicious’:

A vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. ... And within that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information. (*Zami*, pp. 63-4)

In *The Woman Warrior*, the mythical heroine is trained by the wise old man and woman of Taoist folklore, who tell her she should not try to control the flow of blood with her magical powers because “‘you don’t stop shitting and pissing. ... Let it run.” (“Let it walk” in Chinese).’ (p. 35) Later, the smell of blood on the battlefield reminds her of ‘when I menstruated and dreamed red dreams.’ (p. 38) ³¹

In the autobiographical works of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Allison, the traumatic recollections of being molested and abused leave the narrators with a far stronger sense of fear and dread surrounding sex and their developing bodies. Moreover, the experiences described, for Woolf being groped by her

³¹ Elizabeth Grosz, discussing the description of menstrual blood as ‘pollutant’ by Mary Douglas and ‘abject’ by Kristeva, argues that it is the lack of control over the flows of milk and blood that makes them ‘a site of potential social danger insofar as they are resistant to various cultural overlays (being unamenable to coercion and pressure, though in a sense absolutely open to cultural inscription).’ (*Volatile Bodies*, p. 207) Interestingly, both Lorde

half-brother, for Allison being beaten and abused by her stepfather, are seen as shaping the personality and/or sexuality of the narrators. Woolf explains that a sense of shame connected to her body, and a reluctance to see herself in a mirror, could be explained by this experience. However:

Though I have done my best to explain why I was ashamed of looking at my own face I have only been able to discover some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I have got at the truth; yet this is a simple incident; and it happened to me personally; and I have no motive for lying about it. (*A Sketch of the Past*, p. 69)

For Dorothy Allison, the body is both shaped by background ('my sexual identity is intimately constructed by my class and regional background' (*Skin*, p. 23)) and a personal history of abuse. In her autobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Allison describes how the violence the child experiences results in increasingly masochistic fantasies as a means of controlling what happens to her:

I was ashamed of myself for the things I thought about when I put my hands between my legs, more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place. ... Yet it was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to defy Daddy Glen. ... I was triumphant, important. I was not ashamed. There was no heroism possible in the real beatings. There was just being beaten until I was covered with snot and misery. (p. 112-13)

and Kingston give a positive meaning to the smell of blood, which is 'delicious' rather than embarrassing.

The issue at stake here is the formation of a masochistic sexuality. Her account reads as similar to Freud's account of autoerotic beating fantasies in *A Child Is Being Beaten*, where he attempts to determine the origins of masochism (described as a perversion). For girls, masochism is a result of an unresolved Oedipus complex, which means that the beating fantasy 'is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation [with the father] but also a regressive substitute for that relation.'³² Allison's text contradicts this theory: in this quote, it is the actual violence done to the girl that causes the beating fantasies and helps to create a masochistic sexuality. The aim is not to form a fantasised genital relation with the father (or here, step-father), but to survive the real abuse and the real beatings. Likewise, Dorothy Allison rejects the label of perversion in order 'to refuse to be ashamed of my childhood or who I became through surviving it.' (*Skin*, p. 54)³³

One of the recurring themes in the autobiographies is that of sexuality as a trap for women because of the risk of getting pregnant. Maureen Duffy, in the introduction to *That's How it Was* notes the double bind implicit in the 'pressure to conform, to leave school and go into the mill or factory, to get a chap' and, on the other hand, the fact that 'to be "caught" as one of the euphemisms for being pregnant put it, was to be ruined not in reputation

³² Sigmund Freud (1919 [1955]) 'A Child is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion.' In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey. Vol. XVII. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 175-204; p. 189.

³³ However, Janice Haaken notes that the 'survivor discourse' could use trauma in order to sanitise desires otherwise unacceptable in a feminist context: they are justified, because it is a trauma inflicted by others that caused them. (Janice Haaken (1998) *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press).

although that went with it but in life and job prospects.’ (*That’s How it Was*, p. ix) For Paddy, sexuality becomes a sign of ‘underclass’ sluttishness and ‘letting oneself go’, as the description of her ‘blowsy’ step-sister Gladys, lazy and illiterate, and pregnant at sixteen (p. 96) shows. Dorothy Allison describes a similar situation, where ‘sex and bare dirt yards got confused. ... Sex was dangerous, a trap, trashy as drinking whiskey in a paper cup ... Sex was a sure sign of having nothing better to hope for. “You’re different” my mama said.’ (*Skin*, p. 153) The only way out of poverty is education, which means proving to be different. However, teenage pregnancies are shown not to be brought on by sluttishness or indifference, but by either threats of rape (‘if you didn’t do it with boys, they might do *that* to you’ (*Skin*, p. 155)) or a defiant desire to enjoy life as long as one can. For Duffy’s and Allison’s protagonists, being lesbians helps to avoid the teenage pregnancy, but makes them vulnerable in other ways.

For Christa Wolf’s ‘Nelly’, growing up in Nazi Germany, sexuality is inseparable from racist politics. She becomes aware of anxieties surrounding the body at an early age. Listening to talk about the new laws on marriage and venereal diseases she imagines her family may be tainted (p. 62).³⁴ This suspicion becomes stronger when she learns that one of her aunts is mentally ill (and later murdered through ‘euthanasia’). On this background, racism is enmeshed with anxieties about sexuality and gender. When Nelly hears about a

³⁴ The original reads ‘Geschlechtskrankheiten’ for ‘venereal diseases’. Geschlecht, in German, translates as ‘sex’ as well as ‘lineage’ and thus leads to the idea of the whole family being tainted.

Jewish boy who is ritually beaten up by his classmates, she feels compelled to imagine him:

The Jew-boy. Nelly could see him clearly. He is pale, pointy-faced, he's got wavy dark hair, some spots. For some reason he always wears knickerbockers. He's sitting there, slumped over, and everybody who goes past him ... She too must go past him. She too will whack him. ... She tries very hard. ... But she can't get past him. ... She doesn't know whether she would have been able to do her duty. (*Patterns of Childhood*, p. 127-28)

Jewishness is here associated with a failure to look and behave masculine, a feminisation (the pale face, wavy hair, the imagery of 'softness').³⁵ Another memory, that of encountering an exhibitionist, combines the image of strange, perverse masculinity with that of vermin:

His intense, sticky gaze pulls her forward, she moves as if drawn on a string, past this dreadful man, who has taken something whitish and long from his trousers and pulls and pulls on it so that it becomes longer and longer, a disgusting whitish snake, and she has to look at it. (p. 128)

This imagery condenses to an idea of 'impurity' where Jewishness, vermin (she cannot touch insects or lizards any more) and sexuality become connected. 'So it happened that Nelly ... can't hear the word "impure" without seeing vermin, the white snake and the Jew-boy's face.' (p. 129) Jewishness and sexuality are

³⁵ See Sander Gilman, on the construction of the Jew as a weak, feminised Other by Austrian and German science and media: 'the male Jew is read ... as really nothing but a type of female.' Sander Gilman (1991) *The Jewish Body*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 127 According to Zahlmann, Nelly is unable to 'do her duty', to hate and whack the imagined Jewish boy because he is a-sexual whereas the exhibitionist and the phallic vermin stand in for tabooed and feared male sexuality Christel Zahlmann, *Christa Wolf's Reise ins Tertiär*, p. 177.

both associated with 'taintedness' and covered by a similar taboo, so that, when an aunt is accused of being half-Jewish, Nelly blurts out: "'I don't want to be Jewish!'" and her mother asks "'How on earth does this child know what Jewish is?'" But nobody can find an answer to that question.' (p. 133) The traditional prudishness of Nelly's parents and the anxieties about bodily purity instilled by Nazi teachers and Hitler Youth leaders leave a lasting impact on the girl. However, this kind of sex education seems to backfire: what is achieved is not a 'proper German girl's' pride in her healthy body and good Aryan stock. Instead, her body image is suffused with feelings of shame and guilt; another factor that helps to strengthen the connection between hate, lust, fear and guilt laid down in early childhood.³⁶

A woman's body is viewed, in all those examples, ambivalently, as a 'trap', a liability as well as a source of pleasure. Yet, sexuality is mostly portrayed as something prediscursive, coming from 'deep inside'. However, the specific form this sexuality takes is related to personal history: Allison describes the emergence of a masochistic sexuality as a product of and a survival strategy against being raped and beaten, and Duffy, in *That's How it Was*, links the origins of her lesbianism to a solid and loving relationship to her mother. Christa Wolf describes how Nazi racial politics, together with traditional

³⁶ For a description of Nazi policy and the female body, see Martin Klaus (1998) *Mädchen im Dritten Reich: Der Bund Deutscher Mädel* [Girls in the Third Reich: The 'Bund Deutscher Mädel']. Köln: PapyRossa, p. 60: 'Warnings were issued about venereal disease and the corruption of youth especially by "Jewish, Bolshevik or Oriental lasciviousness". ... Lustful stirrings of the body were hushed up or shrouded in mystification; and thus they were baffling, fear-inducing occurrences that took place in the young girl's body against her will and without her having done anything to encourage them.'

prudishness, results in a deep anxiety connected with female bodies and sexuality, and a constant fear of being somehow ‘tainted’.

4. Techniques of the Body

The authors of the autobiographies that form the textual base of this thesis all describe their protagonists’ bodies as embedded in and shaped by the culture in which they grow up, or find themselves in. This does not only have an effect on the protagonist’s body image, or the experience of anger, or sexuality, but, in a much broader way, on bodily comportment, on their way of movement and interaction with the world. Iris Marion Young writes:

The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment—walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. ... The more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition.³⁷

For Young, femininity is a performance, but one that is so ingrained by upbringing to be almost unconscious. In her book on *Formations of Class and Gender* Beverly Skeggs stresses that, for the young working-class women she interviewed, ‘doing femininity’ is the result of a consciously made investment that enables them to ‘put a floor’ under their circumstances. However, because the middle-class ideal of femininity is constructed in opposition to an Other

³⁷ Iris Marion Young (1990) ‘Throwing Like a Girl.’ In: *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 141-59; p. 154.

(the more material, more sexual working-class woman) the performance of femininity, for them, means passing for something they are not. Because of this, and because of their feeling that their bodies somehow don't fit the ideal because they are the wrong shape, femininity is truly an 'uninhabitable category'.³⁸

This impossibility of becoming feminine can be caused by being the 'wrong class', but it can also take the form of being the 'wrong colour', and having to battle with racist stereotypes attached to the (especially female) black body: Elizabeth Alexander argues that one of the most remarkable features of *Zami* is that it describes the body's 'sensual life in intricate detail. ... Because the history of the black female sexual body is fraught with lies and distortion, the story of those bodies ... must take place on a new, self-charted terrain with the marks of a traumatic history like a palimpsest.'³⁹

The experience of migration and changing cultures also exposes the arbitrariness of 'techniques of the body',⁴⁰ for instance in Eva Hoffman's

³⁸ Beverly Skeggs (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender*. London: Sage, pp. 98-117.

³⁹ Elizabeth Alexander (1994) "'Coming Out Blackened and Whole": Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*.' In: *American Literary History*, Winter 1994, pp. 695-715; p. 697.

⁴⁰ One possible way of theorising the connections between the body and its social context is the concept of the 'habitus' developed by Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu. In his 1934 essay 'Techniques of the Body', the ethnologist Marcel Mauss defines the 'habitus' as the sum of biological, sociological and psychological influences 'indissolubly mixed together' (p. 459) that creates ways of using the body in running, eating, swimming, giving birth etc. that 'vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, types of prestige.' (p. 458) See Marcel Mauss (1934 [1992]) 'Techniques of the Body.' In: Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, eds. *Incorporations*. New York: Zone Books, pp. 455-77. For Bourdieu, the habitus of the body is directly shaped by its positioning in a class system. See Pierre Bourdieu (1979 [1989]) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London and New York: Routledge.

descriptions of a clash of Polish 'laissez-faire' attitude with American zeal for bodily self-improvement. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston describes how the protagonist is caught between different ways of 'doing femininity': Chinese and American. For the protagonist of *The Woman Warrior*, being Chinese is to be seen as being feminised. Recent male immigrants ('fresh-off-the-boats') seem feminine instead of 'tight-jawed masculine' and are despised by Americans and Chinese-American children alike (p. 173). Her bullying of a weak Chinese girl is fuelled by self-hatred and the desire to become more masculine, to become part of another, tougher marginalised ethnicity, like a black or Mexican girl:

She wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby soft. ... I hated fragility. I walked around her, looked her up and down the way the Negro or the Mexican girls did when they fought, so tough. ... Her skin was fleshy, like squid out of which the glassy bones had been pulled. I wanted tough skin, brown skin. I had callused my hands; I had scratched dirt to blacken the nails, which cut straight across to make stubby fingers. (p. 158)

Here, the girl wants to escape being 'Chinese-feminine', because, in America, this is seen to be super-feminine, an assumption epitomised by the cliché of the submissive geisha. Because the ideal of fragile, submissive femininity does not seem to apply to Black or Mexican girls, she tries to become like them, and therefore less feminine.⁴¹ Whenever the girl attempts to acquire a kind of

⁴¹ In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the protagonist similarly admires the fierceness of a black girl's 'intent, determined face. I had heard all the hateful jokes and nasty things people said about

femininity, it means being caught between contradictory models of the Chinese-feminine and the American-feminine which are expressed in different ‘techniques of the body’ (for example, gait, body shape, and voice) appropriate for males and females that determine whether she is perceived to be more Chinese or American, more masculine or feminine. This means her body is read differently by Chinese or Americans. For example, walking erect, ‘knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine’ (p. 18) makes her seem more ‘Westernised’ as well as more masculine to her Chinese relatives: ‘She strides along like an Englishman.’ (p. 128) When reconstructing the traditional Chinese village, the narrator contrasts straight-backed masculinity to bent-down femininity:

Women looked like great sea snails—the corded wood, babies, and laundry they carried were the whorls on their backs. The Chinese did not admire a bent back: goddesses and warriors stood straight. Still there must have been a marvellous freeing of beauty when a worker laid down her burden and stretched and arched. (p. 170)

However, there is no simple analogy between strength and masculinity or weakness and femininity. Having a loud, ringing voice (which is Chinese-feminine) makes the protagonist more masculine in American terms: ‘Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more than the Americans. ... We invented an American-feminine speaking personality.’ (p. 155) This kind of difference in concepts of the body frequently

“niggers” ... I wished that girl would come out so I could try to talk to her ... but her mama

leads to conflicts between the protagonist and her mother: her mother complains that she is too slim and the neighbours will think 'they can't afford to fatten up their daughters.' (p. 95) Thus, in *The Woman Warrior*, becoming feminine is described as a conscious effort. At first, the protagonist strives to become 'American-feminine'. Her attempts to adapt to a different culture's idea of femininity leads to conflicts within her own family, where she is seen as either 'masculine' or as an ungrateful daughter. The difficulty of adapting herself to a foreign concept of 'natural' femininity exposes seemingly natural expressions of the female body to be learned and formed, as Mauss had argued, by imitation and education. However, she is also caught between several models of femininity,⁴² and this does not only lead to conflict, but also to the freedom to re-invent herself, first as an American-speaking person and then as a Chinese-American, by taking elements from both cultures.

5. Illness

According to Susan Sontag, societies tend to use illness as a metaphor, attach 'meaning' to it and use it to reinforce codes of morality.⁴³ A case in point is Eva Hoffman's description of the different perceptions of illness in Poland and America:

I'm confronted with the idea of health as effort. Run, swim, do aerobics, I am urged by every cultural loudspeaker. ... Keep moving, keep on the move.

had probably told her all about what to expect from trash like us.' (p. 86)

⁴² One could argue that every girl is, to a certain degree, caught between different modes of 'doing femininity' according to class, ethnic or cultural background, peer-group, subculture etc., so that 'techniques of the body' are never totally deterministic.

⁴³ Susan Sontag (1978 [1991]) *Illness as Metaphor*. London: Penguin.

Expend energy. Build your body up so that it's as hard as a board, as muscular as an athlete's, as invulnerable as a steel machine. ... It's slightly shameful to be sick, anyway, and probably slightly psychosomatic. ... But I keep remembering the more indolent sensuousness that stood for health in my childhood, and I marvel at the eagerness to drive the body to the limit—as if one's flesh could be properly castigated that way, and the danger of passivity exorcised, like a deadly sin. (*Lost in Translation*, pp. 51-2)

Christa Wolf uses illness in a way introduced by psychoanalysis: as an expression of truth, a way in which the unconscious communicates through the body. The narrator's parents, ignoring the signs of approaching war, develop strange psychosomatic symptoms: the father has splitting headaches (*Kindheitsmuster*, p. 142) and the mother swelling glands that constrict the throat (p. 144). Nelly herself develops a fever after witnessing the public expulsion of another Hitler Youth girl, and another one when she realises that Germany has lost the war: 'The final evidence that she really knew without being told came from Nelly's own body, which used its own way of expression, since it was denied any other kind of speech ... First she only cried, but then she developed a fever. "Nervous fever", Charlotte [the mother] pronounced.' (pp. 259-60) The narrator's body tells her, through headaches and small accidents, when she cannot take the strain of remembering any more (p. 71). Thus, psychosomatic symptoms can be read in two different ways: as an effect of choosing to ignore the horrors of National Socialism, or as an effect of too much knowledge that overwhelms the individual.

In *That's How it Was*, TB is not only a recurring topic, but one of the main characters:

‘Among the human characters of the book there is one not human who was nevertheless as real to me and my childhood as any of the more conventionally flesh and blood beings. ... I called her in my mind the *belle dame sans merci*. She was Tuberculosis, always referred to in my family as TB, the earlier Consumption that had consumed the young lives of John Keats and Aubrey Beardsley. ... In 1948 ... TB ... had a significance, almost you might call it a culture, of its own. Hardly a family was untouched by it, and, in my family ... it raged.’ (vii)

Tuberculosis is connected on the one hand to poor living and working conditions (‘It was a sweet factory where the air was a blizzard of flying starch and the youngest girls carried hot iron trays of sweets from one floor to another’ (p. 30)) and ‘family susceptibility’: ‘The whole family was carted off to the doctor, where they stood thin and brown and large-eyed in a row. They were pronounced weak-chested.’ (p. 31) The prevalent remedies, fresh air and food, are impossible to come by, because there is no money: ‘the shed in the garden was turned into a summer-house where they took up residency one after the other, so that they could get more of the smoky city air.’ (p. 32) There is a constant fear of contagion: ‘The evil little pot, smelling deathly of disinfectant, always stood by the bed with the floating cotton-wool blobs of phlegm that turned my stomach. ... Occasionally, after long parting, I kissed her forehead while she turned her breathing mouth away.’ (p. 36) However, the mother’s illness and need brings out a chivalrous protectiveness in Paddy: ‘She was the

castle under siege and I was the desperate defender boiling the oil to send the attacker howling back to cover.’ (p. 36) The pre-NHS conditions of health care are described vividly: the doctor’s waiting-room is icy-cold, and Paddy’s mother is not treated at all; the illness can only be monitored by regular X-rays.

However, Duffy also uses the other, more middle- and upper-class part of the ‘culture’ of TB: the romantic imagery of consumption, making the sufferer somehow more refined. The mother’s illness is pitted against the good health and rude masculinity of the stepfather and his children, who come across as barbaric and ignorant: ‘He was a fool, a stupid brute. He would destroy her with his tribe of savages who sucked her vital energy.’ (161) Duffy plays the two elements of the discourse of TB, that of a poor, dirty, contagious underclass and that of artistic refinement, against each other: on the one hand, she claims the working-class mother’s right to the cultured, artistic air of the TB sufferer.⁴⁴ In opposition to her, the healthy husband and stepsons are introduced as the ‘underclass’, dirty and ignorant Other. On the other hand, Duffy never shies away from the grim reality of TB, its ravaging effect on the mother’s body that does not look beautifully thin, but rather like ‘something out of Belsen’ (p. 167). Moreover, she makes it abundantly clear that it is neither an artistic bent nor dirty habits, but poverty and hard work that makes the narrator’s family members susceptible to the disease.

⁴⁴ On the ‘culture of TB’ and its implications for sufferers see, for example, Linda Bryder (1988) *Below the Magic Mountain: A Social History of Tuberculosis in Twentieth Century Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon; Linda Bryder (1992) “‘Wonderlands of Buttercups, Clover and Daisies’: Tuberculosis and the open-air school movement in Britain 1907-39.’ In: Roger Cooter, ed. *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare 1880-1940*. London and New

6. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that the autobiographies discussed here address the difficulty of 'becoming a woman', stressing the double-binds that coerce girls into accepted femininity while at the same time placing a taboo on their reproductive bodies. However, the body's capacity to 'talk back' is explored in various ways. The autobiographers employ a 'double discourse' of the body that, on the one hand, stresses how the body itself and the protagonist's experience of her body is shaped by upbringing, surrounding culture and personal history. On the other hand, they insist that the body, in anger or sexual desire, can disrupt the accepted limits of femininity. However, the autobiographers also show that there can never be a monolithic 'femininity': Lorde and Kingston draw on a counter-tradition within their own culture of origin that opposes the tabooing of women's bodies; and Kingston and Hoffman describe the impossibility of achieving 'femininity' because the body techniques needed for becoming feminine differ between their culture of origin and the culture they found themselves in. The experience of being embodied, for the autobiographers, is shaped by discourses of the body and of femininity, but, on the other hand, these discourses become never as total as the process of 'becoming a woman' de Beauvoir had described. While some of the authors play the disruptive potential of the body against the femininity imposed on it, others play the multiple discourses of the body and femininity against each other, showing that femininity can never be fully achieved; and Maureen Duffy and Dorothy Allison do both at the same time. The body, as it is described in

the autobiographies, is never simply there, but neither is it inescapably socially constructed. The experience of female embodiment that is described by the autobiographers further complicates ideas of selfhood: the deep roots of 'who they are' are located in a body that can (in a traditional body-mind dualism) become Other to the conscious self, even a traitor; on the other hand, their body image, 'techniques' and sexuality are shaped by patriarchal discourses of the female body. On the other hand, the 'pre-discursive' quality of the body makes it possible for the body to 'talk back' and resist these discourses. On yet another level, the discourse of femininity is never monolithic: it becomes possible for the narrators to situate themselves within a fluid, in-between identity like Kingston's Chinese-American speaking self.

I could be your sister, I could be your mother
We could be friends, I'd even be your brother
But I'd rather be your lover
That's right

(Madonna)¹

Chapter Four

Myths of Return: H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud*

1. 'Only She Has Lost Her Spear': Myths, Symbols, and Psychoanalysis

In the previous chapter, I have explored the autobiographers' accounts of 'becoming a woman', shaped on the one hand by the discourses of femininity, and, on the other hand, a 'pre-discursive' body. I will follow this with a discussion of the psychoanalytic understanding that the origins of the autobiographical self are rooted in childhood. Since the very early years lie in the distant past, and are difficult to remember, what is needed for the autobiographer is a corresponding myth to the myth of origin: the myth of a return to the origin, especially to one's childhood. The textual basis will be H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud*: the author addresses several important aspects of the autobiographical myth of return: the return to childhood, the return to a mythical past, and the return to the mother.² The catalyst enabling this return is, for H. D.'s narrator, a series of therapeutic talks with Freud.

Psychoanalysis offers a personal myth of origin to the autobiographer or analysand: an explanation of why s/he has become the way s/he is today based on the re-creation of her or his origins, most importantly those located

¹ From the album 'Bedtime Stories', Maverick Records.

² I am not looking at the kind of 'myth of return' that is exemplary for the *Bildungsroman*, the triumphant return of the hero to the place he set out from, but that of a return of the adult narrator to her childhood origins.

in childhood. At the same time it facilitates, through memories, dreams and the transference, a possibility of a return to these origins.

Moreover, psychoanalysis lends the theoretical framework for a self that is constructed through narrative, allowing the narrator to turn her individual self into an autobiographical text. Claire Buck argues that 'the central insight which H. D. takes from psychoanalysis is that the self is a text to be read.'³ But if the self is a text to be read, it is also a story to be told. For the narrator of *Lost in Translation*, it is the experience of psychoanalysis that makes it possible to create the voice of the storyteller:

For me, therapy is partly translation therapy, the talking cure a second language-cure. ... It's only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward, in one language, that ... the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begin to emerge. (*Lost in Translation*, p. 272)

Creating a narrating self through psychoanalysis means going back in time, thereby laying claim to one's 'whole story'. For autobiographers who make use of the psychoanalytic framework, this implies the introduction of a different time-frame. According to James Olney, 'life ... does not stretch back across time but extends down to the roots of individual being. It is atemporal, committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the

³ Claire Buck (1991) *H. D. and Freud: Bisexuality and the Feminine Discourse*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 99.

unconscious.’⁴ This perspective would remove the problem of the relationship between present and past altogether, replacing them with a timeless unconscious in which the whole life is contained. However, although for Freud the unconscious is in itself timeless, it contains archaeological layers of memories developed over time where ‘all impressions are preserved, not only in the same form in which they were first received, but also in all the forms which they have adopted in their further developments.’⁵ The unconscious is at the same time timeless and the repository for the past. As Carolyn Steedman puts it, the unconscious is ‘the place where childhood (an individual history) is put, and thus released from time.’⁶ Because the unconscious is located both inside and outside temporality, psychoanalytic thinking upsets linear concepts of time:

For after the uncomfortable birth of psychoanalysis, time was no longer what it had been, ‘before’ and ‘after’ entering into new and hitherto unimagined relations of complicity and interference. The unconscious is indifferent to the measure of the ordinary time ... impinging with some forgotten or unthinkable past event upon a now for which it is always inadmissibly offbeat, untimely, untoward.⁷

However, within psychoanalysis, time can work both ways, since it can move from the present to the past as well. One of the crucial Freudian terms

⁴ Olney, quoted in Shari Benstock (1988) ‘Authorizing the Autobiographical.’ In: *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 10.

⁵ Sigmund Freud (1901[1960]) ‘Psychopathology of Everyday Life.’ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey. Vol. VI. London: Hogarth Press, p. 275.

⁶ Carolyn Steedman (1995) *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority 1780-1930*. London: Virago, p. 93.

in this context is that of 'deferred action' (Nachträglichkeit), the psychic mechanism with which 'the subject revises past events at a later date (*nachträglich*) and ... it is this revision which invests them with significance and even with ... pathogenic force.'⁸ The idea of deferred action will become important for contemporary feminist theories that consider the possibility of an imaginary return to the mother, and I will explore its implications at a later point in this chapter. The other conduit for moving from the present into the past is the concept of transference that is an important topic in *Tribute to Freud*; Susan Stanford Friedman describes the complex relationship between H. D. and Freud as turning on the laws of transference.⁹ I would like to describe the moment of transference as one of those 'conjunctural moments of selfhood' considered in the introduction: a crossing point where the autobiographical self interacts with several theoretical frameworks as well as other people. For H. D., it is the transference that links her first and foremost to her mother, but also to Freud and her own father. On the other hand, she uses the concept of transference to contest psychoanalytic and social norms of femininity.

Transference, in the classical Freudian sense, is the projection of infantile emotions towards parents onto the psychoanalyst; 'it is the subject's

⁷ Rachel Bowlby (1993) *Shopping with Freud*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 76.

⁸ Laplanche and Pontalis (1988) *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, p. 112. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, this does not mean that 'consciousness constitutes its own past' (p. 112), although 'deferred action' has been used in that way. For Freud, there has to be the kernel of a real event even though it becomes endlessly displaced and revised.

⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman (1990) *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H. D.'s Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 284.

relationship to parental figures that is once again lived out in the transference.’¹⁰ However, according to Freud, this mechanism works to protect the repression of unsettling memories:

The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering. ... The patient brings out of the armoury of the past the weapons with which he defends himself against the progress of the treatment—weapons which we must wrest from him one by one.¹¹

The beneficial effect of the transference, though, is that it gives analyst and patient a window onto repressed past events. Unconscious acting-out of feelings towards parents can induce conscious remembering, because it constitutes a ‘piece of real experience ... of a provisional nature. From the repetitive reactions which are exhibited in the transference we are led along the familiar paths to the awakening of the memories.’¹²

H. D., in turn, uses the concept of transference in unorthodox ways, as a direct passageway for a return to her origins that she describes as a kind of ‘creative regression’¹³ and that is in itself beneficial. The transference turns from an unconscious acting-out of a past into a consciously controlled return to childhood in order to understand its impact on the narrator today.

Furthermore, H. D. uses the psychoanalytic concepts of time in order to

¹⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p. 458.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, (1914 [1958]) ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through.’ In: *Standard Edition*, vol. XII, pp. 145-56; p. 151.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 154-5.

¹³ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope’s Web*, p. 294.

open up the fourth dimension of 'mythological time'¹⁴ that is at the same time ancient and eternally present. 'Past, present, future, these three—but there is another time-element, popularly called the fourth-dimensional.' (p. 23) The past, because it embodies the child the narrator was, both is and is not there at the same time: 'But my mother was dead. I was dead; that is, the child in me that called her mamma was dead.' (p. 17) As Claire Buck puts it: 'The recovery of the self as child, the self buried in the past, that is, and the resurrection of the buried desire for the mother, which that child represents, is also therefore a precondition for the future—"heaven".'¹⁵

In the following pages, I will explore how H. D. brings autobiography, myth and psychoanalysis together by recreating herself, and Freud, as mythical figures. Moreover, she interprets scenes from her childhood as unconscious reenactments of universal myths. Or, seen the other way round, she is looking at these scenes through her knowledge of myths, finding new parallels. Since Freud, in his own writings, frequently used classical myths to explain psychoanalytic findings, any interpretation of myth within H. D.'s autobiographical writings cannot but oscillate between the material of ancient myth, Freud's reading of them and H. D.'s reading of them, and/or of Freud.

For H. D., Freud supplies the crucial connection between myth and childhood in *The Interpretations of Dreams*, where he remarks on the

¹⁴ See Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, p. 328.

similarity of development between the individual and humankind: 'He had brought the past into the present with his *the childhood of the individual is the childhood of the race*—or is it the other way round?—*the childhood of the race is the childhood of the individual.*' (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 12, her italics) However, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the dreamer pays a price for this mutual clarification of mythical past and childhood; that of regression. I'd like to quote the crucial passage at length:

... dreaming is on the whole an example of regression, ... a revival of his [the dreamer's] childhood ... Behind this childhood of the individual we are promised a picture of a phylogenetic childhood—a picture of the development of the human race [das Menschengeschlecht] of which the individual's development is in fact an abbreviated recapitulation influenced by the chance circumstances of life.¹⁶

This is an idea influenced by biological evolutionary theories: the development of the singular human being recapitulates the whole evolution of mankind.¹⁷ If it holds true, the ancient world becomes suddenly accessible by probing one's own childhood and its traces in the unconscious. In other words, psychoanalysis could become the 'Key to All Mythologies'

¹⁵ Claire Buck, *H. D. and Freud*, p. 129.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud (1900 [1953]) 'The Interpretation of Dreams', *Standard Edition*, vol. V., pp. 548-9.

¹⁷ See Henri-Frederic Ellenberger (1970): *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychology*. New York: Basic Books. However, I think it is important that the German original reads 'Menschengeschlecht', a poetic term for 'humankind' rather than the Standard Edition's translation 'the race' which is more overtly biologicistic. According to Bruno Bettelheim, this kind of mistranslation is typical for the *Standard Edition*, where Freud's rich, demotic yet poetic German is replaced with Latinate jargon: 'Psychoanalysis becomes in English translations something that refers and applies to others as a system of intellectual constructs.' Bruno Bettelheim (1983) *Freud and Man's Soul*. London: Flamingo, p. 6.

that George Eliot's Casaubon attempted to find in vain. Likewise, looking at myths becomes a way of understanding one's own childhood, because all myths—and especially the Oedipus myth—are a representation of the same eternal law of child development. In Freud's own words:

His [Oedipus'] destiny moves us only because it might have been ours ...

It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so.¹⁸

Thus, Freud's concept of myth is as static as the Jungian and structuralist models of myth that I have discussed in the introduction: all myths tell the same story, because they are a disguised rendition of universal patterns of love and hatred. Juliet Mitchell has, in turn, argued that the theory of the Oedipus complex is in itself a myth (and for her, a myth is a productive, enabling device), a story that explains and compresses the 'stories' of the hysterics and neuroses Freud encountered in his practice.¹⁹

However, the model of myth that H. D. develops is universal, but not static. She uses myth to understand her childhood and memories from her childhood to return to myth. However, she also uses the assumed universality of myth in order to build up an interconnecting system of mythologies that might be 'really' the same: 'Old Janus was guardian of the seasons too ... Thoth was the original measurer, the Egyptian prototype of

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams', *Standard Edition*, vol. V, p. 262.

¹⁹ Juliet Mitchell (1984) *Women: The Longest Revolution: Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Pantheon, p. 305.

the Greek Hermes. I made the connecting link with the still later Roman Mercury, our Flying Dutchman.' (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 100) This correlation of myths is similar to those made by comparative theorists like Frazer (the 'Golden Bough' is mentioned), Jessie Weston or Robert Graves, who make imaginative connections between mythologies from very different backgrounds. For Frazer, it is similarly the evolutionary progression from the 'childhood' of humankind (and the 'primitives' of his day) to modern civilisation that makes it possible to compare myths from very diverse backgrounds and times.²⁰ This evolutionary view could then be used as a justification for a paternalistic stance towards 'primitive' peoples. Carolyn Steedman sums up the positive message of an evolutionary anthropology that based their conjectures about 'the race' on the observable development of children: 'Entire peoples and races might then be seen as part of the childhood of the human race, in need of guidance and protection certainly, but with the potential ... for achieving the adult stage.'²¹ This view was most prevalent in the second half of the last century and could seem to be outdated now. However, according to Wendy Doniger, everyone who uses an approach to myth based on comparing the myths of different cultures must beware of falling into the evolutionist trap: 'postcolonial critique has made us aware of how deeply evolutionist ideas are embedded in the history of comparison.'²²

²⁰ See Marc Manganaro (1992) *Myth, Rhetoric, and the Voice of Authority*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²¹ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, pp. 82-3.

However, I believe that H. D. avoids the implicit universalism and racism of these sweeping theories by individualising the 'collective unconscious' of myth.²³ Because myths and mythical symbols are accessible to everyone in her or his dreams, they become democratic and cease to be the privilege of self-styled sages. In her own interpretation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the narrator argues that

He [Freud] dared to say that the dream had its worth and value in translatable terms, not the dream merely of a Pharaoh or a Pharaoh's butler ... not merely Joseph's dream or Jacob's dream of a symbolic ladder, not the dream only of Cumaean Sibyl of Italy or the Delphic Priestess of ancient Greece, but the dream of everyone, everywhere.
(*Tribute to Freud*, p. 71)

On the one hand, the universality of the language of dreams and symbols furthers a utopian fantasy that reads especially poignantly in a text whose narrator clearly struggles with the impact of the First World War while anticipating the next.²⁴ She is holding on to the idea that, if everyone listens to the language of the unconscious, humankind could live together in harmony: 'in the dream, man, as at the beginning of time, spoke a universal language ... and man, meeting in the universal understanding of the unconscious, would ... save mankind.' (p. 71) On the other hand, she is

²² Wendy Doniger (1998) *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 69.

²³ Although she doesn't use the term, the description of an 'unexplored depth in man's consciousness ... that ... ran like a great stream or ocean underground' (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 71) reads more like a collective unconscious than Freud's ancient memories and symbols that are genetical residues from the early stages of humanity.

²⁴ See Katherine Arens (1995) 'H. D.'s Post-Freudian Cultural Analysis: Nike Versus Oedipus.' In: *American Imago* 52: 4, pp. 359-404.

attracted by Freud's 'precise Jewish instinct for the particular in the general, for the personal in the impersonal or universal'. (p. 71) It is the individual self that interests the narrator, the psyche that 'showed its form and shape in and through the mind, and the body, as affected by the mind's ecstasies or disorders.' (p.13) This means that if the self can be traced back to its origins in childhood, and the origins in childhood recapture the origins of mankind, the move back to the origins implies that the individual has to build up her or his own myth of origin, connect her/himself to the universal symbols and constellations—and I will show later, in greater detail, how the narrator does this for herself.

A main issue in the ongoing debate about myth and psychoanalysis between 'Freud' and the narrator in *Tribute to Freud* is the origin and use of symbols. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud argues that some symbols that occur in dreams are common to all mankind, because they are of a genetic character: 'Things that are symbolically connected to-day were probably united in prehistoric times by conceptual and linguistic identity.'²⁵ However, for Freud, this also implies that there is a very fixed relationship between the symbol and the 'manifest content'²⁶ that it 'stands for': all weapons and tools stand for the penis, as does the snake.²⁷ In contrast to this, H. D. seems to adopt a Jungian stance: 'For a Freudian analyst, the snake is just a phallic symbol, to a Jungian it might be this, but it can also have ten other

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams', *Standard Edition*, vol. V, p. 352

²⁶ The German original reads 'das Eigentliche', which means the 'real thing'.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 356-7.

meanings.’²⁸ As Claire Buck suggests, the Easter-lily in the narrator’s childhood dream can be read as a phallic symbol (thus testifying to the child’s penis envy) or a female symbol (testifying to her desire for the mother).²⁹ This ambiguity is intentional. The lily as symbol works like a duck-or-rabbit drawing, which can be seen as two things at once, but never at the same time: ‘The psychoanalytic context ensures that the lily be understood as a phallic symbol at the same time that it is a symbol of maternal inheritance. ... The structure here ... is either one or the other, but not one without the other.’³⁰

Moreover, for H. D., the relationship *between symbols* is as important as the relationship between symbol and ‘manifest’ signified. Symbols do not point at fixed meanings, but at other symbols: the small statue of Athene who ‘is perfect ... *only she has lost her spear*’ (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 69, her italics) brings on not a discussion of woman’s castration, but a chain of free association on the ‘rod or staff’ Athene might have been carrying: ‘THY ROD AND THY STAFF. ... the goldenrod ... is called Aaron’s rod. The goldenrod brings us to the Golden Bough’ (p. 90) and then on to a branch from an orange tree, a gift from Freud, which in turn points to Goethe’s idealised Italy—described in *Mignon’s Song* (*Kennst Du das Land*)—that is associated with the mother, where ‘against the dark leaves is that glow of

²⁸ Henri-Frederic Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 223.

²⁹ The narrator recounts a childhood dream or fantasy where the child is given an Easter-lily by a ‘God-the-father’ figure; when she comes home with it, her mother plants it on her grandfather’s fresh grave. The narrator concludes: ‘Obviously, this is my inheritance. I derive my imaginative faculties through my musician-artist mother ...’ (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 120-1).

orange-gold' (p. 110).³¹ In H. D.'s poetry, Janice Robinson writes, 'one thing does not "stand for" another thing. ... There is a kind of spiritual etymology, a translation of one set of symbols into another.'³² All symbols are ambivalent, and can be read 'in two ways or more than two ways' (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 51).³³ It is up to the reader to form a coherent picture out of the narrator's Delphic utterances. Within psychoanalysis, Claire Buck writes, 'the interweavings of chains of association' is used 'in order to give access to the repressed material'. However, since H. D. deliberately uses free association as a structural device for her book, she creates a text that 'actually uses the reader's desire to find a principle of organisation to represent an unconscious set of motives and a content.'³⁴ The reader is thus implicated in the quest for an elusive truth.

However, to construct an opposition between Freud's (masculine) system of symbols with fixed meanings and H. D.'s symbols that form a (feminine) web of interconnections might be to over-simplify. Paul Ricoeur argues that Freud's writings display a fundamental ambivalence between seeing symbols as a 'distortion' of the real wishes articulated in the dream, which leads to an interpretation of symbols that is a 'unmasking, demystification, or a reduction of illusions' and an interpretation of symbols 'conceived as

³⁰ Claire Buck, *H. D. and Freud*, p. 111.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³² Janice S. Robinson (1982), *H. D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p. 53.

³³ Tellingly, H. D. invests the word itself with ambivalence: Freud is unsure whether it is pronounced 'ambi-valence' or 'am-bi-valence' (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 87)

³⁴ Claire Buck, *H. D. and Freud*, pp. 120-1.

the recollection or restoring of meaning.’³⁵ This is because a symbol is not a linguistic signifier that stands for a signified. Rather, ‘in a symbol the duality is added to and superimposed upon the duality of sensory sign and signification as a relation of meaning to meaning.’³⁶ Thus, the meaning of a symbol is never self-evident, but in need of interpretation: ‘a symbol is a double-meaning linguistic expression that requires an interpretation.’³⁷ The interpretation of a symbol can never be only a decoding, but it is also a creation of new meaning. This, in turn, paves the way for H. D.’s associative chain of symbols that seldom point towards a manifest meaning, but to yet another symbol taken from a different context. Thus, I would like to slightly modify the feminist consensus that H. D. ‘took Freud’s theories ... and developed his ideas in a direction ultimately antithetical to his own perspective.’³⁸ Rather, H. D. exploits an ambivalence inherent in Freud’s own work on symbols. For her, psychoanalytic theory makes it possible to use myths and symbols as at the same time universal and intensely personal, at the same time creating and endlessly deferring meaning. Thus, she can, as I have argued above, create a myth of origin for herself that touches both on the universal and her own personal history.

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur (1970) *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 9.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁸ Friedman, quoted in Dianne Chisholm (1992) *H. D.’s Freudian Poetics: Psychoanalysis in Translation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 4.

2. Family Origins

Since the narrator in *Tribute to Freud* is constructed within a psychoanalytic framework, and is seen to construct and re-define her own self during the process of analysis, family constellations are crucial for the emergence of this self. In *Tribute to Freud*, the narrator follows psychoanalytic procedure by constructing 'scenes' that reveal these family constellations. However, they are not developed from memories gathered through free association. The narrator chooses to ignore Freud's repeated insistence that 'we never know what is important or what is unimportant until after.' (p. 119) Instead, she narrates a series of memories that seem to capture her relationship to her mother, father and brother with archetypal clarity. In the following pages, I will retrace this collection of memories, scenes, dreams and interpretations of dreams that recreate the narrator's family origins. The obvious way to organise them, given the Freudian triad of father-mother-child, is into 'return to the mother' and 'return to the father'. In that, I am following Friedman who analyses *Tribute to Freud* along the lines of mother-transference and father-transference. However, other siblings, like the little brother whom the child bonds with and the sister who died in infancy, will become important as well.

i. Return to the Father

H. D.'s psychoanalytic myth of origin (or mythical psychoanalysis, or even a myth of the origins of psychoanalysis) within *Tribute to Freud* is designed to further the narrator's own desire of turning herself into a mythical figure by becoming a poetess/ priestess. This is puzzling at first, as psychoanalysis

as a framework does not seem to allow a woman to become anything but a mother. One of the strategies seems to be to claim authority by having her ideas verified by a father-figure, the 'great man'—the book claims to be a tribute, a biographical text, but it is as much an autobiographical text about H. D.'s quest for truth and self-realisation. Elizabeth A. Hirsh notes that 'her "tribute" to him must be understood as in a double, ironic sense ... as praise, but also as a payoff, extortion, blackmail: in short, a canny acknowledgement of his power partly veiled by/as an expression of indebtedness.'³⁹ The relationship is further complicated by a tribute to Freud's writings that paraphrase them (and especially *The Interpretation of Dreams*) in a way that is highly unorthodox, highlighting the similarities between Freud's thinking and her own: 'Her text will inscribe Freud's text ... her text should be read as a typology of texts, of utterances taken from Freud's text as well as from the text of her own dream-vision.'⁴⁰ In order to be validated in her desire to be a mythical poetess-priestess, the narrator in *Tribute to Freud* turns to Freud as a father-figure of authority, as well as to psychoanalysis as an accredited method. However, in spite of Freud's insistence on the scientific methods of psychoanalysis, she describes the hope that she might be initiated into a mystic cult: 'Perhaps I will be treated with a psychic drug, will take away a nameless precious phial from his cavern. Perhaps I will learn the secret, be priestess with power over life and death.' (p. 117) This strategy—infusing psychoanalysis with an occult power

³⁹ Elizabeth A. Hirsh (1990) 'Imaginary Images: H. D., Modernism, and the Psychoanalysis of Seeing.' In: Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis eds., *Signets: Reading H. D.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 432.

⁴⁰ Dianne Chisholm, *H. D.'s Freudian Poetics*, p. 12.

that psychoanalysts would vehemently deny—demonstrates the narrator's ambivalence towards the authority of psychoanalysis.⁴¹ Moreover, the process of authorisation is circular: the narrator bestows authority on the man and the institution she takes her own authority from.⁴² Thus the narrator heaps praise on her mentor in a manner that Blau DuPlessis has called 'aggressive humility'.⁴³ She invests him with messianic power, makes him into (just to name a few) Moses, Hercules, Orpheus, Faust, Jesus and St. Michael; and the greatness of the teacher reflects on her as the disciple. The multiplicity of hallowed names ensures that Freud's authority holds good within the outside world as well as all the different mythologies the narrator works with. However, I think that this multiplicity of great names also severs the tie between H. D.'s 'Freud', the imaginary great man created within the text, and the historical Freud and thereby works to diminish his authority at the same time. In describing the balance of power between analyst and analysand, the narrator oscillates between acceptance and self-assertion: In her view, the 'Professor' is always right: 'actually, he was always right, though we sometimes translated our thoughts into different languages or mediums.' (p. 47) Again, it is the narrator who decides what constitutes a 'correct' translation from 'his' medium into 'hers'. On the other hand, 'the Professor is not always right' (p. 98). According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'she credits her "intuition" which challenges his

⁴¹ See Dianne Chisholm on the 'occult' Freud: 'Thrice-Greatest: Hippocratic-Hermeneutic-Hermetic Freud.' In: *H. D.'s Freudian Poetics*, pp. 26-36.

⁴² 'Authorisation is therefore a circular process ... because it is H. D.'s use of [Freud's] words, and concepts, which gives psychoanalysis authority for the reader. ... The authority of both are entwined and necessary to one another.' Claire Buck, *H. D. and Freud*, p. 116.

“judgement”.’⁴⁴ Within a framework that allocates ‘intuition’ to woman and ‘knowledge’ to man, the narrator can strategically claim that her ‘intuition’ is a form of knowledge as well. ‘She sees both his very male root and her very female tendril as part of the same common tree of knowledge.’⁴⁵

However, the narrator’s aims do not fit seamlessly into ‘Freud’s’ text, and she does not display an uncritical adoration, but bristles at the idea that ‘women did not creatively amount to anything or amount to much, unless they had a male counterpart or a male companion from whom they drew their inspiration’ (p. 149) or that women ‘biologically’ can’t be happy as a lesbian couple (p. 152). While H. D. builds Freud’s theoretical resistance to her ideas into the text, she constructs a ‘Freud’ sympathetic to her ideas,⁴⁶ a fellow scholar of ancient religions, a man that is maternal as well as paternal, because he is, like Socrates, a midwife to the emergent soul (pp. 84 and 116). But, again, his resistance against becoming ‘feminised’ by the narrator is built into the text:

He had said ... ‘I do *not* like to be the mother in the transference—it always surprises and shocks me a little. I feel so very masculine.’ I asked him if others had what he called this mother-transference on him. He said ironically and I thought a little wistfully, ‘O, very many.’ (pp. 146-7)

⁴³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, quoted in Dianne Chisholm, *H. D.’s Freudian Poetics*, p. 231.

⁴⁴ Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1986) *H. D.: The Career of that Struggle*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁶ See Dianne Chisholm, *H. D.’s Freudian Poetics*, p. 3. However, David Bakan argues that Freud draws on Jewish mystical tradition without admitting to this influence on his theories. See David Bakan (1990) *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*. London: Free Association Books.

The difficulty with reclaiming either myth or psychoanalysis is that there is a strong patriarchal bias in both: Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, claims that Freud's teachings are overdetermined by a more general patriarchal structure that values women only as objects for men.⁴⁷ The Greek goddess Athena, a powerful, identificatory figure often invoked in *Tribute to Freud*, is defined through the relationship with her father, from whose head she was born, and the little figure of Athena on Freud's desk has 'lost her spear'—an obvious hint at the fact that women are castrated. In recreating her childhood, the narrator remembers that it was her father who was the keeper of symbolic objects: 'this, besides being the magnifying glass from my father's table, is a sacred symbol. This is the sacred *ankh*, the symbol of life in Egypt, but we do not know this—or perhaps our father knows it.' (p. 25) The symbolic object that encapsulates this difficulty is the snow owl on her father's shelf (symbol for Athena, wisdom and knowledge). When the child asks her father to give it to her, her father says that it is hers, on the condition that it stays where it is (p. 125). The father, as the possessor of knowledge, passes it on to the daughter while making sure it remains in effect his.

This problem is not solved, at least not entirely, by referring to a separate women's tradition of symbols separate from patriarchal tradition (I will later explore H. D.'s use of a pre-patriarchal mythical figure, the Cretan snake-goddess who stands for pre-Hellenic matriarchal societies as well as, in

⁴⁷ See Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*.

psychoanalytic terms, for the Pre-Oedipal phallic mother). Instead, the gendering of the symbols is blurred: the lily stands for the mother, but also for the Indian god Vishnu, traditionally pictured inside a lily, and associated with the upright (phallic) snake (p. 122), the magnifying glass on the father's table is the *ankh*-sign for life as well as the symbol for 'woman' and the planet Venus, and the source of fire the narrator's brother steals, Prometheus-like, from his father (p. 25). The myth that is crucial for H. D.'s depiction of the father-daughter-relationship is that of Zeus and Athena, born from her father's head. This constellation gives power to the daughter, but it is derived from the father. In transference, his authority is given over to Freud (both are scientists, both are in possession of 'sacred objects'). However, the narrator gives an ironic rendition of the typical father-daughter relationship known to any 'amateur dabbler with the theories of psychoanalysis':

A girl-child, a doll, an aloof and silent father form this triangle, this family romance, this trinity which follows the recognized religious pattern: *Father*, aloof, distant, the provider, the protector—but a little un-get-at-able, a little too far away and giant-like in proportion ... Mother, a virgin, the Virgin, that is, an untouched child, adoring, with faith, building a dream, and the dream is symbolized by the third number of the trinity, the Child, the doll in her arms. (p. 38)

I think it is interesting that, in this rendition of the Oedipal relationship between father and daughter, it is not the father who takes up the fantasised position of the husband, but the girl-child that takes up the position of the

Virgin Mother, indicating that this might not be the narrator's, but an intrinsically male fantasy that has become endorsed by psychoanalytic theory, a view that has been upheld by many feminist critics of psychoanalysis (most notably by Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman*).⁴⁸ On the other hand, in Freud's own text, the meaning of the doll is twofold, depending on whether it is situated before or after the transference of love from the mother to the father: either the girl stands for the mother and the doll is herself; or the doll stands for the imaginary baby she wants to have with her father.

That play [with dolls] was not in fact an expression of her femininity ... She was playing the part of her mother and the doll was herself. ... Not until the emergence of the wish for a penis does the doll-baby become a baby from the girl's father, and thereafter the aim of the most powerful feminine wish.⁴⁹

H. D.'s use of the doll image displays a characteristic double identification by the narrator: on the one hand, with Athena or the Virgin Mary, the virginal daughter born from or impregnated by the father, *and* with the daughter that desires the mother, or desires to be the mother.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ 'Her pleasure would be always already a function of her rejection, a refusal of her self ... Therefore trying to re-present herself, as a mother also, by playing mommy with the doll-child would supposedly offer nothing femininely pleasurable. Whereas, being (re) made by the desire of Oedipus would be "the most powerful feminine wish." But who would be Oedipus? The Father? Or the son?' Luce Irigaray (1974 [1985]) *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, (1933 [1964]) 'Introductory Lecture XXXIII: Femininity.' *Standard Edition*, vol. XXII, pp. 112-35; p. 128.

⁵⁰ According to Albert Gelpi, this double identification is used in the poems of *Trilogy* as well: 'the Virgin-scribe writes the book of the Virgin-mother. The "bundle of myrrh/ she held in her arms" is the Child and the poem, the poem as Child.' Albert Gelpi (1990) *Re-*

However, the constellation of the narrator's father and brother is not seen through the psychoanalytic interpretation of the Oedipus myth, where the father-son relationship is one of rivalry for the love of the mother, but through the Prometheus myth, where the struggle is one for power and authority: her older brother has taken a magnifying glass from her father's desk and used it to burn a piece of paper in the garden. Her father, looking like a Bible illustration of a patriarch, comes out to reproach him.

What will my brother say? He cannot say 'I brought fire from heaven.'

He cannot answer father Zeus in elegant iambs. ... But my brother has never heard of Prometheus, he doesn't know any Greek. He has taken the magnifying glass from our father's study table and that is, possibly, a sin, second only to playing with matches. ... There is frost in the air. I sidle nearer to my brother. I am implicated, though in no way blamed. (*Tribute to Freud*, pp. 25-27)

What makes this little scene so 'real', so memorable, is precisely its resemblance to the myth of Prometheus. If the typical constellations of childhood are captured in myths, the events of childhood can be seen—in retrospect—through those myths. However, if the narrator's claim is right that those myths are universal, they are re-enacted in families, through all ages and everywhere, in much the same way. However, as I have argued before, this ahistoricity can become a problem; it leads one to ignore the differences between historically and culturally diverse contexts, and it lends universality to the patriarchal family structures the narrator in *Tribute to*

Freud encounters as a child, where the son rebels against the father, whereas she herself is 'implicated but in no way blamed'.

However, the authority of the father, and thereby of Freud-the-father, is undermined in *Tribute to Freud* in several ways. There, it is Freud's need to be loved that makes him in turn dependent on the narrator:

The Professor is beating with his hand, with his fist, on the head-piece of the old-fashioned horsehair sofa. ... The Professor said, '*The trouble is—I am an old man—you do not think it worth your while to love me.*' ...

Anyhow, he was ... too wise and too famous altogether, to beat that way with his fist, like a child hammering a porridge-spoon on the table. (p. 15-17, her italics)⁵¹

'Freud's' desire to be loved (and Teresa de Lauretis reads the historical Freud's 'undisguised wish to be loved' into his analytic relationship with 'Dora' as well)⁵² enables the narrator to turn the transference on him, to make the father-figure into a child who is dependent on her love. In a similar vein, H. D. offers a myth of the origins of psychoanalysis that establishes and undermines 'Freud's' authority at the same time:

We ourselves are free to imagine, to reconstruct, to see even as in a play or film, those characters, in their precise setting, the Paris of the period,

Signets, pp. 318-35; p. 333.

⁵¹ Susan Stanford Friedman reads this scene as a re-enactment of men's jealous desire: 'Freud's pounding demand that she love him more repeated the implicit desire in her father's jealousy of Pound and the explicit complaints of Pound, Aldington, and Lawrence. ... In the domain of the Maestro (as H. D. sometimes called Freud) the demands of the father-analyst repeated the patriarchal system of desire.' *Penelope's Web*, p. 294.

1885. ... Caesar strutted there [in the Salpêtrière asylum]. There Hannibal—Hannibal? Why Hannibal? As a boy himself he had worshipped Hannibal, imagined himself in the role of world-conqueror. But every boy ... strutted with imaginary sword and armour. *Every boy?* This man, Caesar ... might simply be living out some childish fantasy. ... True to my own orbit, my childhood fantasies of Hannibal ... the Carthaginian (Jew, not Roman)—I, Sigmund Freud understand this Caesar. I, Hannibal! ⁵³ (pp. 79-80)

Echoing Freud's use and analysis of his own dreams and fantasies in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, H. D. imagines a founding scene of psychoanalysis that is at the same time a heroic conquest and the living out of a boyish fantasy. Her own dream of Moses in the bulrushes is analysed as the wish, 'in the deepest unconscious or subconscious layers of my being, to be the founder of a new religion' (p. 37)—'megalomania they call it.' (p 51) However, H. D. picks up on a similar megalomania entertained by Freud himself. Not only does she gently poke fun at the heroic, androcentric narratives that are used to relate the origins of Science,⁵⁴ but she also addresses his desire to be a Jewish hero. According to David Bakan, the historical Freud had a very strong messianic identification: 'Freud conceived of himself, at least to some degree, as the military Messiah of the Jews ...

⁵² Teresa De Lauretis (1994) *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 40.

⁵³ In 'The Interpretation of Dreams', Freud writes about his identification with the 'semitic general' as a stance against anti-semitic schoolmates. Later, 'the wish to go to Rome had become in my dream-life a cloak and symbol for a number of other passionate wishes ... though their fulfilment seemed at the moment just as little favoured by destiny as was Hannibal's lifelong wish to enter Rome'. *Standard Edition*, vol. V, pp. 196-7.

Freud tended to see himself as protagonist in a grand historical myth-drama ... he early identified himself with Hannibal, the Semitic hero ...'⁵⁵ Freud identifies not only with the historical Hannibal, but also with the mythical Oedipus. On the one hand, he believes that every (male) person is, or has been, Oedipus in his anger towards the father and his wish to be loved by the mother. On the other hand, he 'expresses once again the nostalgic desire to be at one with the masculine subject of Greek antiquity ... In effect, Freud plays the role of an Oedipus figure, who—unlike his ancient ancestor—knows what he wants and what he wants to see.'⁵⁶ Both H. D.'s and Freud's desire to become a mythical hero could be fueled by a universalist concept of myth that sees, on the one hand, everyone's story encapsulated in the myth, but, on the other hand, makes it possible for the mythmaker to imagine him- or herself as a hero whose life and work makes a difference to mankind. However, this interlocking of the 'collective' aspect of the myth (every person's story) and the individual myth of the hero makes it possible to shape a highly individual myth that creates an implied collective of equals, like H. D.'s community of dreamers linked by a collective unconscious. As Dianne Chisholm argues, H. D.'s claim to be a prophetess can be read as an expression of the desire to be equal to the heroic Freud: 'We might read H. D.'s role of prophetess as a claim to be Freud's spiritual or psychic equal, an egalitarian rather than an elitist claim.'⁵⁷

⁵⁴ See Donna Haraway (1989 [1992]) *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. London and New York: Verso.

⁵⁵ David Bakan, *Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, pp. 180-1.

⁵⁶ Karen Bassi (1998) *Acting Like Men: Gender, Drama and Nostalgia in Ancient Greece*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 33-4.

⁵⁷ Dianne Chisholm, *H. D.'s Freudian Poetics*, p. 215.

ii: Mother-Brother-Self

The most important return psychoanalysis allows for the narrator in *Tribute to Freud* is the return to the mother ('the Professor said in the very beginning I had come to Vienna hoping to find my mother.' (p. 17))

However, the wish to return to the mother is extended to a more general sense of 'homecoming'. Because the mother's name is Helen, she immediately evokes Helen of Troy, and the Helen in Poe's famous poem:

Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,

Thy Naiad airs, have brought me home

To the glory that was Greece

And the grandeur that was Rome. (Tribute to Freud, p. 44)⁵⁸

From an American context, reaching back to the origins of Western culture, to Egypt, Greece and Rome seems to be a reaction to a specifically American feeling of being cut off from the origins in Europe. In *Her*, H. D. describes how this nostalgia causes a sentimental 'Anglo-saccharine backwash.'⁵⁹ Yet, the narrator in *Tribute to Freud* describes her own feelings of 'homecoming' when arriving in Greece by quoting Poe: 'I had come home to the glory that was Greece'. (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 44) H. D. connects this nostalgia for classical antiquity with the psychoanalytic belief

⁵⁸ In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich, whose mother's name was Helen as well, describes being fascinated by hearing her father recite the poem when she was a child. Drawing from a similar constellation (artistic mother and exacting scientist father), she uses the poem to describe her own desire to return to the mother: 'She was, Helen my mother, my native shore of course; I think that in that poem I first heard my own longings, the

that the original longed-for place of origin is the mother, by stating that travelling to Hellas/Greece felt like a re-connection with her own mother, Helen. The return to the origins of Western culture is at the same time a return to the mother. This is especially borne out in the 'writing on the wall' episode: Although 'Delphi and the shrine of Helios (Hellas, Helen) had been the main objective of my journey' (p. 35), the narrator and Bryher only get as far as Corfu. There, she has a vision of writing on the wall of their hotel room: first a goblet, the face of a soldier or airman, and a tripod, then a roughly drawn ladder, then the image of Athene/Nike moving upwards. She is then forced to break off the vision, but Bryher instead captures the last image: 'she said it was a circle like the sun-disk, and a figure within the disk; a man, she thought, was reaching out to draw the image of a woman (my Niké) into the sun beside him.' (p. 56) The meaning of this vision (or rebus, as Freud had described the images found in a dream)⁶⁰ is again ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems to be a straightforward expression of the narrator's desire to return to the mother, replacing the thwarted journey to Delphi. The wish to return to the origins is expressed in the return to the ancient world (the symbols are 'Greek in spirit'), and the return to an archaic picture-writing, analogous to the 'rebus' of the dream.⁶¹ That the final image is seen by Bryher could suggest that this imaginary return to the mother becomes possible within a lesbian union. On the other hand, the figure in the

longings of a female child, expressed by a male poet, in the voice of a man—my father.' Adrienne Rich (1976 [1986]) *Of Woman Born*. London: Virago, p. 220.

⁵⁹ H. D. (1981 [1984]): *Her*. London: Virago, p. 129.

⁶⁰ See Sigmund Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams, *Standard Edition*, vol. V, pp. 277-78.

sun is male, and the figure of identification is the motherless and castrated Athene-Nike. ('She is perfect ... *only she has lost her spear.*' (p. 69)) This ambivalence in the imagery might be an expression of a fundamental ambivalence in the author herself. Elizabeth Hirsh argues that

'to return home to mother' would be to break down the motherless formal perfection of Nike with the materiality of writing ... Such an exploration of the borderline/between (opposites) in fact constitutes the most radical impulse of H. D.'s writing practice, one that was often at odds with her desire to be perfect.⁶²

However, the return to the mother is marked as a fantasy. Indeed, the most problematic relationship touched upon in *Tribute to Freud* is the relationship to the mother. In childhood recollections of the narrator, she doesn't seem to be there at all; much like the mother Virginia Woolf describes in *A Sketch of the Past*, she is always occupied with other people, too busy to notice her daughter, which in turn engenders the daughter's desire to 'be near her always':

About *her*, there is no question. The trouble is, she knows too many people and they come and interrupt. And besides that, she likes my brother better. If I stay with my brother, almost become my brother, perhaps I can get nearer to *her*. ... *If* one could stay near her always, there would be no break in consciousness. (p. 33)

⁶¹ For Elizabeth Hirsh, it is the 'picture writing that contests the entrenched opposition between Image and Symbol' that is characteristic for H. D.'s radical style of writing. Elizabeth A. Hirsh, 'Imaginary Images', p. 437.

⁶² Ibid., p. 437.

In *Her*, this obscuring of the protagonist's mother is directly related to the father's tyrannical attitude: "Your father likes the light concentrated in a corner. He can work better if I'm sitting in the dark." ⁶³ It is precisely the absence of the mother that fuels fantasies of a powerful, preoedipal mother and a perfect state of being united with her:

The way out seems to be the daughter's desire for a primal Mother, a fictionalizing fantasy for a Demeter who has not yet lost her beloved daughter to the clutch of Hades ... To write, she had to wander homeless, an outcast from the feminine norm. But, as outcast, she felt a perpetual sense of loss, diaspora from the maternal body of the motherland. ⁶⁴

H. D. can thus make use of the in-built ambivalence towards the mother within psychoanalysis. On the one hand, the girl is exiled from the body of the mother which she must renounce at the onset of the castration complex. On the other hand, in the idea of the mother-fixation, psychoanalysis offers an opportunity to articulate the desire to return to the mother. Like many other feminist psychoanalysts, H. D. reclaims a Pre-Oedipal state of closeness to the mother. In *Tribute to Freud*, she has Freud declare: 'I had not made the conventional transference from mother to father, as is usual with a girl at adolescence.' (p. 136) However, for the narrator, this is no sign of abnormality. It allows her a 'creative regression' into a pre-Hellenic Cretan culture:

⁶³ H. D., *Her*, p. 79.

⁶⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, pp. 278-9. See also Susan Stanford Friedman (1989) *Exile in the American Grain*. In: Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram, eds. *Women's Writing in Exile*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, pp. 87-112.

The Professor speaks of the mother-layer of fixation being the same in girls and boys, but the girl usually transfers her affection ... to her father. Not always. The Crete mother-goddess is associated with the boy or youth in the wall-painting of the crocus fields. ... The Professor went on about the growth of psychoanalysis and how mistakes were made in the beginning, as it was not sufficiently understood that the girl did not invariably transfer her emotions to her father. He asked, 'Was your father a little cold, a little stiff?' (p. 175)

The 'boy or youth' is, presumably, the daughter in her pre-Oedipal, masculine stage. This reference to the pre-Hellenic mother goddess is also made in Freud's essay *Female Sexuality* (which he had published shortly before he met H. D.):⁶⁵ 'Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus phase comes to as a surprise, like the discovery, in another field, of the Minoan-Mykenan civilisation behind the civilisation of Greece.'⁶⁶ This mother-goddess is a serpent-goddess as well (p. 175) and as such represents the Pre-Oedipal 'phallic mother'. The image of the older, matriarchal goddess underlying God-the-father is then taken up and elaborated on by H. D.: 'There is, beneath the carved super-structure of every temple to God-the-Father, the dark cave or grotto or inner hall or cella(r) to Mary, mère, Mut, mutter, pray for us.'⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, p. 290.

⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud (1931 [1961]) 'Female Sexuality.' *Standard Edition*, vol. XXI. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 112-35; p. 226.

⁶⁷ MSS for *The Gift*, quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, p. 329.

According to Susan Stanford Friedman, H. D. is a forerunner of the later 'Goddess feminists', because she transforms the ambivalent, alluring and deadly Mother Goddess of male theorists like Joseph Campbell and Robert Graves into a purely life-giving figure.⁶⁸ However, H. D. interprets the return to the mother in a highly personal, sexualised way as well:

Lesbian desire ... represents the return to the 'phallic mother', the mother whom the daughter still desires and still sees as all-powerful. ... Such equations are linked to the theoretical connections Freud made between lesbianism and mother fixation.⁶⁹

However, as Luce Irigaray warns, in the Freudian context the primal mother is seen as pre-historic, out of history which officially begins with 'that beginning represented by Greece, and the concept of origin which Greece set in place',⁷⁰ and that it is within this history that women must live and repress their sexual desires. Yet, H. D. seems to disturb this crucial distinction between the Hellenic and the pre-Hellenic. The narrator can attempt to return to the pre-Hellenic, pre-Oedipal 'phallic mother', but, on the other hand, masculine, classical Greece becomes feminised in turn: 'By decoding her love of Greece ... as a desire for the pre-Oedipal mother [Hellas-Helen], Freud had facilitated the feminisation of her most potent symbol of creative inspiration.'⁷¹ It thus becomes unclear where the

⁶⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman (1990), *Creating a Women's Mythology: H. D.'s Helen in Egypt*. In: Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, eds., *Signets*, p. 395.

⁶⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, pp. 373-405; p. 320.

⁷⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 64.

⁷¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, p. 326. According to Diana Colecott, H. D. creates a lesbian counter-discourse to the modernist enthusiasm for masculine ancient Greece: 'By creating her own female Hellas, H. D. was not only laying claim to the discourse of male homoeroticism but also challenging masculine privilege and reclaiming

'childhood of the race' is really situated: in classical Greece? Pre-hellenic Greece? Ancient Egypt? Stone-age matriarchy? Instead of the undecipherable prehistory that Freud posits for the pre-Oedipal mother, H. D. creates a rich tradition of mother-worshipping rites that are situated both before and within classical antiquity: 'Into the maternal mysteries of Eleusis and Egypt, of vast preoedipal regions, she takes him.'⁷²

Teresa de Lauretis argues that the return to the mother's body is always a fantasy 'because *that* body is always lost.'⁷³ However, for her, it is an enabling fantasy, fashioned, in retrospect, out of actual lesbian desire in the present. The psychoanalytic concept which reverses the flow of memory from the past to the present and makes the fantasy possible is, again, that of deferred action. Teresa de Lauretis argues, drawing on a poem by Adrienne Rich:

By deferred action, an earlier scene (here, the child and the mother) is recovered or remembered in the light of a later one (here, the present scene of 'two women, eye to eye'), which thus acquires a causative function. To read the latter scene as 'desire for the mother', then, is to collapse the psychic movement of fantasy from present to past to future into a retrospective, static tableau, and to reduce the fantasmatic, dynamic

Greek literature from a misogynist tradition.' Diana Colecott (1999) *H. D. and Sapphic Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 131.

⁷² Dianne Chisholm, *H. D.'s Freudian Poetics*, p. 222.

⁷³ Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, p. 171.

triangulation of the subject's desire between the other woman, the mother's body, and her own to the fixity of a frozen memory.⁷⁴

H. D., as well, marks the return to the mother as a fantasy, because her mother is dead, and because the actual mother sacrificed herself to the males in her family and had little time for her daughter. This element of fantasy is included in the overdetermined name 'Helen' as well, because of one version of the myth that has Helen actually go to Egypt, while a phantom of her was sent to Troy.

For H. D., psychoanalysis allows another strategy to create the past anew in returning to it. The endless chain of replacements of the child's parents and siblings with analysts and lovers, when carried out consciously and not as unconscious repetition, makes it possible to revise the past: for example, 'Freud' becomes a receptive, warm father figure to replace the narrator's 'cold and stiff' own father. In addition to this, because a female person can become a replacement for a male and vice versa, H. D. can undo the link between sex, gender, and sexuality assumed by psychoanalysis:⁷⁵ 'Freud' himself can become gendered feminine (though very male) and the brother can be replaced by male or female lovers. For H. D., the oedipal triangle ceases to be important; instead, she argues 'My triangle is mother—

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 170-1.

⁷⁵ See de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*. However, according to de Lauretis, there is a fundamental ambivalence in Freud's writing between the traditional assumption that 'a specific object ... and a specific aim' were integral to a masculine or feminine sexual instinct and the positing of a sex drive that is independent of its object's gender. (p. 17)

brother—self. That is, early-phallic-mother, baby brother or smaller brother and self.’⁷⁶

A rendition of this early triangle sidesteps the conflict between brother and sister prescribed in classical Freudian theory, where the boy despises and fears the castrated girl and the girl envies her brother. Instead, the narrator takes her cue, again, from myths and fairy-tales. She describes a scene where she and her younger brother, as little children, decide to leave their parents together, and sit on a kerbstone, sulking:

We ... [are] making a little group, design, an image at the crossroads. It appears variously in Greek tragedies and it can be found in your original Grimm’s tales or in your nursery translation, called Little-Brother, Little-Sister. One is sometimes the shadow of the other; often one is lost and the one seeks the other, as in the oldest fairy-tale of the twin brother-sister of the Nile Valley. (p. 29)

Because Isis and Osiris, in the Egyptian myth, are lovers as well as twins, one might speculate that the narrator replaces a sexual identity that is shaped by desiring the father by one that is shaped by desiring a brother, a relationship that could ideally be one of equals. Janice Robinson writes: ‘In terms of mythology, H. D. identified her own stance with that of Artemis and Isis. In her identification with the Isis-Osiris myth, she then was with the brother-lover Osiris, symbol of spiritual equality.’⁷⁷ The role of ‘brother’

⁷⁶ Letter to Bryher, quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope’s Web*, p. 319.

⁷⁷ Janice Robinson, *H. D.*, p. 293.

can be filled by a male or female person: 'You [Bryher] are very likely the ... younger BROTHER.'⁷⁸

The desire for a brother is complemented by the very un-Freudian desire for a sister. The articulation of this desire starts out with a mention of the biographical fact that H. D. had a sister, who died in infancy: 'there were the two tiny graves of our sisters (one of those was a half-sister).' (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 31). The narrator describes a desire for 'the lost companion, the sister I had never had, a twin sister best of all.' (p. 186) This desire for a sister, only alluded to in *Tribute to Freud*, has been used by H. D. to explain lesbian attraction: *Her* delineates how a search for a sister, an alter ego that is also herself, and thus utterly different from the misogynist males and exaggeratedly feminine women she encounters, informs the protagonist's attraction to another woman, Fayne Rabb. Fayne is an androgynous figure that blurs the boundaries between brother and sister as well. In naming her Itylus, after the poem by Swinburne, she expresses both the desire for a sister (the close bond between Philomel and Procne) and an androgynous lover (Itylus).⁷⁹ Thus, she is 'contributing to an evolving myth of womanhood whereby Hermione taps her spiritual, erotic and poetic powers through intimate self-identification with a "twin-self sister"'.⁸⁰ This is an alternative route to the classical Freudian explanations of lesbianism (one

⁷⁸ Letter to Bryher, quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web*, p. 320.

⁷⁹ 'H. D.'s use of the poem derives in part from Swinburne's feminist revision of the Procne/Philomel myth, in which he places the emphasis on the bond between the sisters-Procne slays her own son, Itylus, in order to revenge her husband's rape and mutilation of her sister, Philomel.' Cassandra Laity (1996) *H. D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 36.

becomes a lesbian either by over-identification with the father or by failing to carry out the transference of desire from the mother to the father at all), but it lays itself open to assumptions that loving a woman is only a love of oneself, a form of narcissism.

The problem with this strategy seems to be that, in explaining her bisexuality through family constellations of childhood, the narrator oscillates between two equally questionable options: the woman she loves can occupy the position of brother; or she can occupy the position of twin sister, thus exposing lesbian love as narcissism. Cassandra Laity argues that this is part of H. D.'s project of forming a 'romantic myth of origin'⁸¹ by reconnecting herself with romantic and decadent poetry. This tradition allows her to develop a subversive femininity and 'to articulate a spectrum of desires and gender disruptions not available to H. D. in the high modernist discourse of the 1920s.'⁸² However, this too becomes problematic as the decadent discourse only allows for two positions of femininity: of the white—female or androgynous—lifeless statue or the sadistic lesbian vampire. 'Assuming the Romantic forbidden and effeminate poetic, she [Hermione] risks ... her own internalisation of the Decadent discourse that would efface her powers.'⁸³ On the background of this decadent discourse that sees lesbian desire as either narcissistic or vampiristic, the return to the

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 37.

⁸² Ibid., p. 34.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 38.

pre-oedipal mother and the replacement of the brother by a female lover seems to be the more enabling strategy.

3. A Myth of One's Own: Conclusion

H. D.'s passepartout key to childhood and mythology (the childhood of the individual is the childhood of the race) seems to lend itself to simplistic conflations, where myth mirrors the eternal law of child development, or ancient or 'primitive' cultures are depicted as childlike. However, the myth of return H. D. develops is more complex: it is a return within time (to the past) and outside of time (to mythical time); it is a return to the narrator's own childhood and at the same time a fantasy of this childhood; it is a return to ancient Greece, and at the same time to pre-classic times. Psychoanalytic concepts of time provide the fluidity that makes this possible: H. D. uses the concepts of transference and mother-fixation not as unconscious defence-mechanisms, but as devices to engender a return to childhood, mythical time, and the mother. This return is clearly a fantasy, but, on the other hand, unmistakably healing and real for the narrator. Moreover, H. D. invests psychoanalysis with authority and disrupts it at the same time. In *Tribute to Freud*, H. D. creatively exploits pervasive ambivalences within psychoanalytical theory (about symbols as creators of meaning and as distortion of the real; about the present as repetitive effect of the past and as shaping and creating the past; about lesbianism as a regression and disruption of the normal female development and as healthy alternative to

the path of heterosexual development)⁸⁴ to shape a highly personal myth of origin. Because H. D.'s narrator reads her own childhood through myth and myth through her own desire to return, the universal and the individual aspect of myth enmesh and shape a narrative that turns the narrator into a visionary, heroic figure, a poet-priestess. At the same time, the narrator insists that myths and dreams are sources accessible to everyone, everywhere.

⁸⁴ See Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, p. 20.

I, the writer who looks back upon those earlier selves, am a multiple personality created by them. ... I am not painting a static portrait. I am, rather, walking along a corridor of mirrors in which I observe myself at different stages of my life.
(Rosemary Manning)¹

Chapter Five

Past, Present and Future: These Three

1. Theories of Narrative Selfhood

In the previous chapter, I have argued that the psychoanalytic concepts of time (transference, deferred action and the timeless unconscious) disrupt linear time and make it possible for the analysand to go back in time and imagine a return to her own childhood. Now, I want to explore the time structure of the other autobiographies considered here, as well as the connection between temporality and the construction of narrative selves. Let us begin with a brief overview of some theories of narrative selfhood that address the complex problem of the interaction between past and present in a wider context.

An autobiography is, by definition, a narration of the writer's past.

Moreover, as argued before, because the autobiographer herself is shaped by the events of the past, they become an explanation of her present self. Seen from the position of hindsight, the past events can be perceived as steps leading up to the narrator's present situation in a teleological manner, and events that do not easily fall into this pattern might be forgotten or even cut

out. On the other hand, many autobiographies depict the past self as intrinsically different from the present self, an alien being that remains unintelligible. As Gertrude Stein puts it succinctly:

That is really the trouble with autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself.²

In every autobiography, the (at least) two autobiographical I's—the past I whose life is narrated within the autobiography and the present I, the narrator who reflects on the past and the process of writing an autobiography—are separated by a time gap. On the other hand, if the past is seen as lodged in the present, in the memory (or the atemporal unconscious) of the autobiographer, it is difficult to access, but not at all past. Thus, there are two possible tendencies in the conceptualisation of the past in modern autobiography (and most autobiographies discussed here occupy a middle ground between them): a 'horizontal' narrative that stresses the smooth progress from the past to the present and the connections between them, or a 'vertical' narrative that perceives the past as multilayered depth.³ Some

¹ Rosemary Manning (1987) *A Corridor of Mirrors*. London: The Women's Press, p. 9.

² Gertrude Stein (1938 [1989]) *Everybody's Autobiography*. London: Virago, p. 53.

³ See Olney, quoted in Shari Benstock (1988) 'Authorizing the Autobiographical.' In: *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. London and

autobiographers that see the present as backed by the past employ an image of time that has been used by phenomenological philosophers as well:

First, there is the linear and objective view of a past stretching away irretrievably ... behind the present ... Second, there is the more phenomenological-existential approach which makes of the present a being-in-the-world whose richness is inseparable from the *accumulated* significance of my successive experiences.⁴

However, as the autobiographical narrator attempts to excavate and understand the past self or selves, she may place the emphasis not on the smooth progress from past to present self, but on the insurmountable gap between them. These different concepts of the remembered self are informed by different theories of the past: first, one could see the past (and thus the past self) as the same as the present. Second, one could perceive it as utterly Other, and this would mean that the past self is not immediately accessible to the narrator. Third, the past could be analogous to or 'like' the present. Paul Ricoeur has theorised these three possible ways of looking at the past in *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur refers to the debate between historians as to whether it is possible to immediately understand (and thus re-enact) the past or whether the past permanently is that 'what is missing.' He attempts to reconcile these two standpoints: the narrated past both exists and does not

New York: Routledge, pp. 10-33; p. 10 : 'Life is atemporal, committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious.'

⁴ Anthony Paul Kerby (1991) *Narrative and the Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 22, his italics.

exist, or rather, it only exists within language. Thus, 'the Analogous, precisely, is what retains in itself the force of reenactment and of taking a distance, to the extent that being-as is both to be and not to be.'⁵

This could be true as well of autobiographers contemplating their own past selves: they are there and not there at the same time. The autobiographer can look for 'traces' of her past experiences in her present self, or examine her past self as something that is completely other, alien to herself. The greater the temporal gap is between the narrator and the narrated self, the more it becomes possible to 'see oneself in childhood as "other" ... and therefore easier to look upon, examine and describe.'⁶ Within autobiography, the past selves only exist within narrative; the narrated self is 'like', or analogous to the self-that-lived, but it can never be accessed and understood immediately (and the narrator's tortured attempts to make the childhood self 'speak' in *Kindheitsmuster* is a case in point).

In recent years, there has been a large number of publications concerned with the use of narrative for the construction of selfhood, in the field of psychology as well as in sociology and cultural studies. According to Kim

⁵ Paul Ricoeur (1985 [1988]) *Time and Narrative* vol. III. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p. 155. For an application of Ricoeur's theory to autobiography that results in a concept of autobiography as metaphor, see Tonya Blowers (1998) 'Locating the Self: Re-Reading Autobiography as Theory and Practice.' PhD, University of Warwick.

⁶ Tonya Blowers, 'Locating the Self', p. 112.

Worthington, theories of narrative selfhood have been important as 'a means to counter the nihilistic atomism of contemporary [poststructuralist] thought without recourse to metaphysical essentialism.'⁷ Conceptualising self as narrative makes it possible to situate the individual in a plurality of sometimes radical and/or marginal communities without ever being entirely dominated by one master narrative: 'the narrative subject is not only made up in, but makes up, communal (cont)texts [sic] of value and meaning.'⁸ Thus, the narrative, and the narrating self, might be able to contest the mainstream discourses from her position of marginality. As Carolyn Steedman puts it: 'personal interpretations of past time—the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit—are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture.'⁹

According to Charles Taylor, one of the main structuring principles of autobiographical narrative is the endowment of the past with meaning for the present. This is seen as a central feature of modern subjectivity after the demise of concepts of a divine plan that, before modernity, gave a purpose to human lives. However, the acknowledgement that the events that shape

⁷ Kim Worthington (1996) *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 180.

⁸ Ibid., p. 191.

⁹ Carolyn Steedman (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman*. London: Virago, p. 6.

one's life are seemingly random and not ordered by an all-pervading divine providence creates a typical dilemma:

First, as a chain of happenings in world time, the *life* at any moment is the causal consequence of what has transpired earlier. But second, since the live to be lived has also to be *told* its meaning is seen as something that unfolds through the events. ... The first seems to make the shape of a life simply the *result* of the happenings as they accumulate, whereas the second seems to see this shape as something already latent, which emerges through what comes to pass. ... This mode of life-narration, where the story is drawn from the events in this double sense ... is the quintessentially modern one, that which fits the experience of the disengaged, particular self. It is what emerges in modern autobiography.¹⁰

Since autobiography is a form of narration, and a narrative cannot but arrange events in a meaningful order, it seems, again, to be reasserting selfhood by implying that the self is more than an accumulation of random experience and a person's life more than just a chain of events. In Mark Freeman's words: 'We find ourselves right smack in the middle of what is sometimes called the "hermeneutic circle". ... How else would we know when a given story of development began except with reference to its outcome?'¹¹ Of course, the story of development can come 'full circle' as

¹⁰ Charles Taylor (1989) *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 289.

¹¹ Mark Freeman (1993) *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 106-7. Freeman goes on to explain this phenomenon, using Freud's

well, when the origins are seen as already containing the life story that develops from them. Steph Lawler, fusing Ricoeur's theory of narrative with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, describes how, for working-class women striving to become middle-class, contingent aspects of middle-classness become read into the self retrospectively:

Narrative, then, configures an identity through a movement towards self-actualisation: the hero *becomes* who she *always was*. ... in this context, narrative configures an identity in which the woman realises her 'true self' through becoming middle class.¹²

However, if the autobiographer acknowledges that it is she who establishes this order, doubt begins to creep in. A striking example for this is *A Sketch of the Past*, where all attempts to explain the present self with memories of the past remain ambiguous: for example, the present self's inability to look at herself in the mirror ('I cannot now powder my nose in public') and a feeling of shame connected to the body might be explained with the memory of being molested by her half-brother as a small child: 'I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes ... I remember how I hoped that he would stop ... But it did not stop. His hands explored my private parts too.' (p. 69)

concept of 'deferred action', where earlier memories are given new meaning in the light of later events, providing an explanation why a person has developed in a certain way. Exploring the past thus sheds light on the present: 'the very idea of an origin or cause partakes not of one dimension in temporality but two, backward and forward at once: now and then are becoming compatriots in the articulation of a story, able to make sense simultaneously of both.' (p. 108)

¹² Steph Lawler (1999) 'Getting Out and Getting Away.' In: *Feminist Review* 63, pp. 3-24; p. 10.

However, all these memories dredged up from the past are in themselves not sufficient to explain the present self's sense of shame: on the one hand, there may be other explanations; on the other hand, this experience would not have been as traumatic if there had not been a deep-seated sense of shame connected to the female body already instilled in the child, 'instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past'. (p. 68-9) For Woolf, memories of past events are not in themselves enough to explain the present self, they are only proof that 'the person is evidently immensely complicated.' (p. 69)

On the other hand, recounting the past can be a means of separating oneself from the past instead of connecting to it. Anthony Giddens describes how, for therapeutic purposes, people are encouraged to write down autobiographical stories. This is a means not to re-establish the past but rather, to rid themselves of the past, because it might dominate the present. He argues that autobiography fulfils the therapeutic function of a 'corrective intervention into the past' because writing an autobiography might help the writer to be done with the past. However, 'reconstruction of the past goes along with anticipation of the likely life trajectory of the future.'¹³

¹³ Antony Giddens (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Oxford: Polity, p. 72.

Autobiography as a way to understand and structure the past, thus, has a double function: to keep a not fully comprehended past from weighing down on the present and inhibiting choices for the future, and to record the past as a blueprint for the future, empowering the subject to 'change the script' if destructive patterns are found. Part of the psychologically informed outlook on the life narrative is the constant wariness of the repetition compulsion that causes the subject to be stuck in the past without realising it, falling 'prey to the psychological deep freeze of repetition, which in turn can give our lives the appearance that there are secret forces responsible for their very shape.'¹⁴

Another problem with 'therapeutic autobiography' is that the autobiographer can get caught in a circle: she strives to understand the meaning of her life, but is constantly forced to acknowledge that she does not unearth a meaning that is already there, but that she herself creates it by telling her own story. See, for example, the ending of *That's How it Was*: Duffy tells the story of a working-class girl who manages to triumph against adversity, becoming a scholarship girl and finally going to university. Because the reader knows that Duffy herself went on to become a teacher and writer, it could seem as if these achievements were already latent in the autobiographical I's origins, her determination to be different. However, the novel itself does not end with a triumphant achievement or homecoming, in the manner of the *Bildungsroman*, but with the mother's death. This traumatic event forces the

¹⁴ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self*, p. 183.

narrator to take stock of her life. The urgency to remember is fuelled by a therapeutic attempt to understand herself and help herself deciding what to do with her future: 'And that's why I put it all down too to try and find out so I'll understand and know what to do.' However, she comes to realise that the task to remember everything 'just as it was' can never be fully accomplished, and the novel ends with an exasperated 'and what the hell do I do now?' (p. 221)

The past, therefore, is seen as ambiguous, at the same time there (in the memory, in the unconscious, in the text) and not there (because it is already past); it can be seen as the same as the present (if one privileges continuity) or Other (if one privileges the gap between the past and the present); it must be retold and got rid of in order to get on with one's life, or retold and understood in order to provide a blueprint for the future. In the following pages, I will try to explore how authors as diverse as Virginia Woolf, Christa Wolf, H. D., Maureen Duffy, Dorothy Allison, Eva Hoffman and Maxine Hong Kingston negotiate these problems and situate their autobiographies between the backward pull of the past and the forward push towards the future. To begin with, I will look at the utopian motifs within autobiography that connect 'time past' to 'time possible'. Then, I will return to the 'haunting' past and problems of memory. I will look at the ways in which the past is seen as at once unreachable and overwhelming: the present self is described as shaped by and totally different from the past self. Moreover,

meaning is seen as not automatically inherent in a well-ordered narrative; it must be created by the writer herself.

2. Time Past and Time Possible: Autobiography and Utopia

Insofar as autobiography can be read as a myth of origin, it incorporates elements of the utopian as well: the origin may be represented as rooted in a 'golden age', a dreamed-of future that is projected backwards into the past.

Some utopias, Ruth Levitas writes 'may involve an idealisation of the past as a criticism of the present, as in the representation of a Golden Age, which has largely conservative implications.'¹⁵ Using Ricoeur's terminology, this would mean seeing the past as Other, but as a positive Other, as something that is different from a present that needs to be changed. The golden age can also be located within the narrator's childhood, leading to the narrator's nostalgic yearning for a lost paradise. However, connecting oneself to an idealised past does not need to be an intrinsically conservative strategy. A close reading of the autobiographies discussed in this chapter shows clearly that the ideal childhood and the golden age is not easily recaptured. As Gillian Whitlock puts it: 'Utopian writing ... sits uneasily on the boundaries between fact and fiction. Autobiography draws on utopian modes to represent liminal, threshold states and perception. Childhood is one of these

¹⁵ Ruth Levitas (1990) *The Concept of Utopia*. New York and London: Philip Allen, p. 175. The author is referring to Barbara Goodwin.

states, and illness is another.’¹⁶ Within the autobiographies discussed here, the utopian elements are an undisguised mixture of fantasy and reality. Utopia, famously defined by Ernst Bloch as the ‘not-yet’¹⁷ is in turn redefined by Drucilla Cornell as the ‘not yet of the never has been,’¹⁸ that is, the extension into the future of an imagined, not a real past. In a similar vein, Linda Anderson describes autobiographical memory not as a repository for facts, but as a space to construct alternative pasts as ‘imaginings of a different time’ especially for women writers. This means that memory ‘contains a future we have yet to gain access to.’¹⁹

According to Ruth Levitas, there are two ways of defining utopia: one that looks at utopia in terms of ‘form’: the description of a perfect community or an ‘ideal commonwealth’, which is used as a blueprint of how society should be, but can easily become totalitarian (one person’s utopia is another person’s nightmare). The other possibility is to look at utopia in terms of its ‘function’, as an expression of ‘desire for a better way of being and living’ that can take many different forms.²⁰ In Frances Bartkowski’s words, utopian

¹⁶ Gillian Whitlock (2000) *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography*. London: Cassell.

¹⁷ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 86.

¹⁸ Drucilla Cornell (1991) *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law*. New York and London: Routledge, p. 112.

¹⁹ Linda B. Anderson, (1997) *Remembered Futures: Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*. London and New York: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 12.

²⁰ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, pp. 6-7.

writing creates 'plenitude imagined out of scarcity.'²¹ The autobiographies whose relationship to the utopian will be explored here are more about a 'desire for a better way of living' than about providing a blueprint for an ideal community. This is especially true for Maureen Duffy's *That's How it Was*, where the desire for a better life manages to turn, if only for short moments in time, scarcity into abundance. Although both Lorde and H. D. depict idealised communities, they do not offer a precise strategy for creating or running them. However, in a nod towards the utopian tradition, both Audre Lorde's and H. D.'s ideal communities are situated on an island: one makes the Caribbean island Carriacou into a mythical homeland inhabited by strong and loving women, the other imagines a pacifist Moravian community of brothers and sisters making peace with the Indian tribes on Wunden Eiland (island of wounds/miracles). Yet, both islands are, albeit in different ways, clearly recognisable as fantasies, as products of the narrator's wish for a tradition of mothers and grandmothers to counter the tradition of fathers. On the following pages, I will explore how two key features of utopian fiction—that of the mythical island and that of the emergence of abundance out of scarcity—are used in the autobiographies of Maureen Duffy, H. D. and Audre Lorde in order to connect the narrator's individual past to a utopian origin.

²¹ Frances Bartkowski (1989) *Feminist Utopias*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p. 10.

i. Abundance Out of Scarcity

In the following, I want to explore Maureen Duffy's autobiographical novel using one of the classical definitions of utopia as an imagination of abundance out of a present marked by scarcity. According to Ruth Levitas, the dialectical relationship between scarcity (present) and abundance (future) has been one of the main motifs of utopian fiction. Some critics have explained the utopian genre as an attempt to deal with a universally present gap between infinite wants and finite resources. This is done either by creating escapist fantasies of a land where the rivers flow with milk and honey, or by inventing a social system that deals with scarcity by persuading citizens to restrain their wants or to distribute fairly the resources that are available. However, according to Levitas, this theory uses an essentialist concept of the human condition:

Utopia is a social construct which arises not from a 'natural' impulse subject to social mediation, but as a socially constructed reaction to an *equally* socially constructed gap between the needs and wants generated by a particular society and the satisfactions available to and distributed by it.²²

In *That's How it Was* scarcity is clearly socially created; most obviously by wartime rationing, but also by a class system that denies adequate medical care, accommodation and food to the poor as well as a gender system that

²² Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, pp. 181-2, her italics.

denies education, independence and sexual exploration to girls.²³ Yet, the narrator's blueprint of the ideal community is her mother's family, related by the stories her mother tells her. Because most of them died of TB while still young, they acquire a mythical quality for Paddy, compensating for the brothers and sisters she never had:

They were my mythology, and all the people in them lived with daring and laughter and died tragically. ... I tried religiously to relive her childhood, but I was alone ... Such tales she told me that she peopled my past with heroes and made a mythology for me out of the stories of dead children and fairy tales she read me ... and those are the real past. (*That's How it Was*, p. 26)

The 'real' past is a past that was never there, that is recreated by the narrator and her mother through storytelling and imagination, and that is a counter-narrative to the narrator's 'commonplace childhood'. For the narrator, her mother's childhood, though it is marked by hard work, poverty and cramped living space, becomes a world of richness, strong emotions and community. It is also a counter-narrative to traditional mythology in that it allows working-class boys and girls to become heroes. The narrator's mother has the power to create abundance out of scarcity in other ways as well, being able to sew school uniforms for her daughter and dresses for herself, making

²³ See especially the preface to *That's How it Was*, where Duffy locates the narrative within a social world which is characterised both by class inequality and contradictory standards for girls (while there is pressure 'get a chap' to prove normality, becoming pregnant results in swift ostracism).

wonderfully soft handkerchiefs out of old flour bags (while other poor children wipe their noses on their sleeves). She is somehow able to afford restaurant lunches for her daughter and herself in order to teach her the 'proper' way of using various pieces of cutlery, while the narrator 'never discovered how she knew all that lore' (p. 210). She manages to provide glimpses of a better way of living and being for her daughter on the background of the dismal, almost dystopian conditions of living with the Willerton family.²⁴ Duffy depicts how the narrator's mother provides a way out of poverty and lack of education; but the scene in the restaurant shows how the desires of the narrator and her mother are bound up with class:

I worked through soup, spoon brought sideways to the mouth, plate tilted away; grilled plaice, squeeze slice of lemon gently to avoid spurting, select correct implements, do not turn over, select central bone; pour water for two; roll and butter, break into small pieces, do not cut, apple tart and custard, spoon and fork ... all implements to be laid gently side by side, upwards and vertical at the end of a course. ... By the time I finished I was exhausted but triumphant, I could see by her face that I had graduated. (p. 209)

²⁴ The Willertons are marked as members of the non-respectable working class (and as devouring males) by their eating habits: their lack of table manners and taste, wolfing huge amounts of bread and margarine while Paddy and her mother can appreciate the rare treat of a bit of real butter. For the iconography of coarse table manners as set-pieces of the 'working-class childhood', see Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*: 'I remember it happening [her father swatting a fly on the breakfast table] but it's so much like the books that I feel ... a bit-player in a soft and southern version of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.' Carolyn Steedman (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman*. London: Virago, p. 35.

The enjoyment of the rare good meal (this is in the middle of rationing) is stifled by the stilted social conventions of eating the narrator has to master, where the food is set out to trap her, 'just placed to catch a hand lifted a bit too much'. Food, as in the traditional utopias of plenty, symbolises a desire for a better life. However, the mother's desire for a better life for her daughter causes her to teach her to eat daintily (adhering to conventions of gender) and with the proper implements (adhering to conventions of class). The class system is shown to work not just by depriving the poor, but by forcing those who want to escape poverty to comply with its social conventions. The restaurant scene encapsulates the discourses of class and gender that are implicated in the eating of food.²⁵

In *That's How it Was*, Duffy's narrator depicts her mother's attempt to lift her out of a dystopian world. In other autobiographies, the abundance out of scarcity is created by the child's own imagination, leaving the adult narrator wondering 'what you can make a paradise out of.' (*Lost in Translation*, p. 5) Like Hoffman's narrator, who, in wealthy Vancouver, misses the zest for life people have in much poorer Poland, Dorothy Allison describes the poor people of the American South as larger than life, capable of big emotions, violence and excess, all breaking out in the ecstatic music of the gospel tent:

²⁵ For a discussion of eating habits (down to the way of chewing) as markers of class and gender, see Pierre Bourdieu (1979 [1989]) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by R. Nice. London and New York: Routledge.

I sobbed and dug my heels in the dirt, drunk on grief and that pure, pure voice. ... I wiped my eyes and swore out loud. Get those boys another bottle, I said. Find that girl a hard-headed husband. But goddamn, get them to make that music. Make that music! Lord, make me drunk on that music.²⁶

For Allison, this richness of emotions is created by a fierce longing for a better life that is shared by most of her characters. The utopian is fuelled by a desire for a different future that sometimes breaks into the present time as a moment of ecstasy, drunk on music.

ii. Island of Women, Island of Wounds: On Imagined Communities

In *The Safe Sea of Women*, Bonnie Zimmerman reads American lesbian novels as part of a collective myth of origin, an attempt to create a shared heritage for a community whose members come from very diverse origins. Moreover, the lesbian myth of origin envisions a matriarchy that is at the core of 'women's history':

Common to all, however, is the vision of an original lost time when women were sufficient unto themselves ... The garden, for example, symbolizes a primeval memory—or, more likely, projected wish—that women were once together or whole in paradise until we were exiled and lost our home. ... The garden [also represented as Sappho's island] can be

²⁶ Dorothy Allison (1988 [1995]) 'Gospel Song.' In: *Trash: Stories and Poems*. London:

found at every level of the lesbian myth: it symbolises the natural self we search for on a journey back from exile, the enveloping warmth of the lover's arms, and the utopian community of women.²⁷

Carriacou, as Lorde describes it, is a 'feminist utopia yet to be lived'²⁸ in more than one sense. What makes it utopian is that it is 'nowhere', it cannot be found on a map, and thus it cannot be 'throttled and bound up between the covers of a schoolbook.' (*Zami*, p. 6).²⁹ In the imagination of the narrator's family, Carriacou is a place of abundance as well as a lost paradise, evoked by the sensuousness of the foods sent from there:

Carriacou, a magic name like cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, the delectable little squares of guava jelly ... the long sticks of dried vanilla and the sweet-smelling tonka bean, chalky brown nuggets of pressed chocolate for cocoa-tea, all set on a bed of wild laurel leaves, arriving every Christmas time in a well-wrapped tin.' (p. 5)

What makes Carriacou a lesbian feminist (but not entirely separatist) utopia is that it is inhabited by strong women who do not need men:

The Noel girls. Ma-Liz's older sister, Anni, followed her Belmar back to Carriacou ... and became her own woman. Remembered the root truths

Flamingo, p. 69.

²⁷ Bonnie Zimmerman (1992) *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989*. London: Onlywomen, p. 29.

²⁸ Claudine Raynaud (1988) 'A Nutmeg Nestled In Its Covering of Mace': Audre Lorde's *Zami*. In: Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 221-42; p. 241.

taught her by their mother, Ma-Mariah. Learned other powers from the women of Carriacou. ... *Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty.* (p. 5, her italics)

However, this is more than a piece of Grenadian social history. For Audre Lorde, *Zami* is 'a biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and the history of myth.'³⁰ This overlay of autobiography and myth means that the women of Carriacou are real people as well as mythical beings:

They join Linda [her mother] and Gran'Ma Liz and Gran'Aunt Anni in my dreaming, where they dance with swords in their hands, stately forceful steps, to mark the time when they all were warriors.' (*Zami*, p. 87).

Lorde's Carriacou reads very much like the kind of lesbian feminist utopia Zimmerman describes, an island of powerful women who preserve a tradition of matriarchy that reaches back to ancient times. However, what Audre Lorde resists is the vagueness of the myth of a universal matriarchy

²⁹ Gillian Whitlock argues that Lorde 'places the Caribbean as a mythic space, shaped by the forms of longing, memory and identification that are frequent markers of diasporic writing.' *The Intimate Empire*, p. 179.

³⁰ Claudia Tate (1983) 'Interview with Audre Lorde.' In: *Black Women Writers at Work*. Harpenden: Oldcastle, pp. 100-116; p. 115.
See also Leigh Gilmore (1994) *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 27-8: 'In the transposition of autobiography to biomythography, the self, "auto" is renamed "myth" and shifted from the beginning to the center of the "new spelling". Lorde's mythmaking

that is being created by and for white women. In her *Open Letter to Mary Daly*, Lorde writes:

Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? ... What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other noneuropean women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us.³¹

Audre Lorde's matriarchal utopia is very precisely located within a Black, Afro-Caribbean tradition (and I will explore this in greater detail in chapter seven). On the other hand, Carriacou is not an easily accessible place of origin, but a fantasy, already lost, already 'elsewhere'. She describes her mother's yearning for the island where she was born: 'She grew up [in Grenada] dreaming of Carriacou as someday I was to dream of Grenada.' (*Zami*, p. 5) What Lorde constructs here is a utopia that is both there and not there, precisely located and mythical at the same time. This utopia is not a secure past that points forward to a certain future of an ideal community of women. However, although it is marked as a fantasy, it is not, like many utopias, 'the acceptable embodiment of an impossible ideal in the form of a description of a fictitious state of society, as inspiration to the continued march of progress.'³² Rather, the dialectic relationship between a utopian future and an imperfect present, where the imagination of the utopian future

attaches less, then, to the life she retells than the self who can tell it. Central to this mythic self is her place in a history where she can feel at home ... with women.'

³¹ Audre Lorde (1984 [1996]) 'Sister Outsider.' In: *The Audre Lorde Compendium*. London: Pandora, pp. 65-234; pp. 120-1.

acts as a catalyst for change (as described by Levitas) is disrupted by privileged moments when past, present and future merge, 'the past dreaming the future blooming real and tasty into the present, now.'³³

According to Bonnie Zimmerman, lesbian utopias (and others as well) often take the form of a Green World, a Garden of Eden. The green world 'represents a locale existing outside time and space, uncontaminated by social convention or the daily responsibilities of marriage and reproduction.'³⁴ In *The Gift*, H. D. develops such a 'green world' utopia of peace and harmony with nature. The narrator, listening to her grandmother who drifts in and out of lucidity, hears of a magical place, Wunden Eiland, an island in the Monocacy River which has since been washed away, and which the narrator misreads as Wunder Eiland: 'She says Eiland which must be an island, and the Wunden, I suppose, is wonder or wonderful.' (*The Gift*, pp. 82-3) Later she learns that Wunden Eiland means Island of the Wounds, and that there is 'a story of the meeting of the chief medicine men of the friendly tribes and the devotees of the Ritual of the Wounds [of Christ].' (p. 86) There still are, written on a deerskin scroll,

the words of strange pledges passed, strange words spoken, strange rhythms sung which were prompted, all alike said, by the power of the

³² Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 14.

³³ Audre Lorde (1996) 'A Burst of Light.' In: *The Audre Lorde Compendium*. London: Pandora, pp. 235-335, p. 270.

³⁴ Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, p. 78.

Holy Spirit; the Holy Ghost of the Christian ritualists and the Great Spirit of the Indians poured their grace alike. ... [The narrator's grandmother] in trying over and putting together the indicated rhythms, she herself became one with the *Wunden Eiland* initiates and herself spoke with tongues—hymns of the spirits in the air—of spirits at the sunrise and sun setting, of the deer and the wild squirrel, the beaver, the otter, the kingfisher, and the hawk and the eagle. (*The Gift*, pp. 86-7)

H. D. draws on two strands of the utopian tradition, on the one hand that of a paradise, where nature is pure and unpolluted and humanity lives in harmony with nature, and on the other hand that of the perfect community; in her case, a community of religious initiates who respect women as equal to men, live in peace with the Indians (who themselves stand for a different way of living that is closer to nature and spirituality). According to Dianne Chisholm, nature-celebrating passages like these are inspired by the American transcendentalism of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson. However, 'for her, to see herself as a poet, is not merely an issue of gender, not just a matter of feminizing "Song of Myself" into "Song of Herself", but a matter of recovering vital (re)sources'³⁵ in maternal imagery. However, this utopia is portrayed as fragile and threatened, 'because the stricter brethren of the church said it was witchcraft. ... You can be burned for a witch' (*The Gift*, p.

³⁵ Dianne Chisholm (1992) *H. D.'s Freudian Poetics: Psychoanalysis in Translation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 49.

88); that is, because of male misogyny. On the other hand, the utopian bond with the Indian tribes is broken when a massacre happens, and it is not quite clear who is perpetrating it, hostile Indians or zealous Christians (p. 99).

Wunden Eiland is, on the one hand, the lost paradise, but, on the other hand, always *already lost* and threatened by violence, and it might be a fantasy altogether: 'Maybe it was all shadows and pictures in Mamalie's mind, maybe there never ... was such a meeting at *Wunden Eiland*, maybe there never was a *Wunden Eiland*.' (p. 89) What H. D. develops here is a phantasmatic recreation of a maternal heritage, a fantasy of a fantasy:

These memories-fantasies extend ... across the barrier that normally separates one generation of life from another to reveal the suppressed and unrecorded desires of her mother, of her mother's mother, and of her mother's mother's mother a century earlier ... conducting the transference dialogue across the threshold of life/death.³⁶

The origin myths developed by Lorde, Duffy and H. D. all create a past that is a fantasy, a past that was never there in reality, but that is related by stories told to the narrator by her mother (or grandmother). Nevertheless, because of the powers of storytelling, these imaginary pasts are as powerful as the real past, or, as Duffy puts it, they *are* the real past. Because these pasts are linked to mothers as storytellers, the autobiographers can claim the mythical past as a heritage, a heritage that is matrilineal in spite of the patriarchal

³⁶ Dianne Chisholm, *H. D.'s Freudian Poetics*, p. 89.

world the autobiographers live in; as with narrative memory, utopian narratives are able to breach the divide between the narrator's own life and that of others, constructing a 'family tale' that spans generations.³⁷ While Duffy's narrator attempts to bring her mother's childhood (and thus the mother herself) back to life, and H. D. uses the powers of transference to reach out towards her female ancestors, Lorde's narrator

felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child ... elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the 'I' moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed. (Zami, p. xvi, her italics)

However, all three autobiographers describe having to get away from their mothers to be able to live the lives they want: Paddy by physically moving away to college, and H. D.'s and Lorde's narrators by putting emotional distance between them as well. For them, the mother (as Carolyn Steedman puts it) 'was the most cut, but ... it was she who did the cutting.'³⁸ The narrators' connection to the utopian worlds situated in the past, as well as the mythical places of origin, is always tenuous; the utopian past, because it is past, is necessarily already lost. Yet, these pasts point forwards toward a future that 'has never been.' Likewise, the utopian communities described are highly personalised, marked as part of the autobiographer's heritage that

³⁷ For an analysis of the maternal heritage in autobiographies of daughters, see Lynn Z. Bloom (1980) 'Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Women's Autobiographies.' In: Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, eds. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. New York: Ungar, pp. 291-305.

potentially opens out to like-minded others: Duffy, in rewriting her ancestors as fairy-tale heroes, invites others to create their own family myth, Audre Lorde's community of mythical root-women is part of a 'matrilineal diaspora' that is open to connections with other women's heritages.³⁹ H. D.'s grand utopian vision encompasses the whole of humanity being able to understand the connections between all beliefs, so that the Great Spirit of the Indians and the Holy Ghost of the Christians can coexist side by side.⁴⁰ Again, it is myth that forms the link between the personal and the universal, the imagined community or the grand utopian vision. The utopian visions developed within Duffy's, Lorde's and H. D.'s autobiographies are, for the narrators, a fantasy and a necessity at the same time. As Frances Bartkowski writes: 'Feminist utopian fictions [are] not only a corrective rewriting of history, but also testify to the need to make a future different from the past.'⁴¹

³⁸ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, p. 54.

³⁹ Hema Chari argues that 'since the nation is an "imagined community"... the subject of nationalism is a myth, the nationalist narrative is doomed to be nostalgic and utopian. It is destined to deconstruct itself.' Hema Chari (1997) 'Scripting Women into the Discourse of Nostalgia.' In: Jean Pickering, ed. *Narratives of Nostalgia, Gender and Nationalism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 121-37; p. 135. In Chari's framework, mythical, nostalgic, utopian imagined communities seem welded to the totalising concept of the nation that 'cannot represent the diversity of the population.' (ibid.) However, the narratives developed in the texts discussed are highly personal as well as potentially universal, or, as Freeman claims for autobiographical writing, 'signifying both an individual history and a social one.' *Re-Writing the Self*, p. 211.

⁴⁰ See Dianne Chisholm, in *H. D.'s Freudian Poetics*, on H. D.'s 'dream of a common language'.

⁴¹ Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias*, p. 162.

3. Time Preserved in Amber: The Haunting Past

i. Time Travels and Escape Stories

As I have argued earlier, a utopian vision can be fuelled by a desire to recreate an (imaginary) past. However, there is also the possibility of imagining being stuck in the past and/or in a childhood marked by suffering. I have already remarked upon Christa Wolf's narrator being haunted by a past she would like to get rid of. Her quest for her childhood self collapses under the burden of the notion that, if only she could understand what made her become an ardent Nazi, she would be able understand the collective psyche of the whole of Germany. It is the 'rift that goes through time' (p. 9) created by Nazism that cuts her off from her childhood self and prevents her from mourning for the loss of her childhood home that she had to flee at the end of Second World War.⁴² The very notion of 'home', *Heimat*, is forever tainted by its usage by the Nazis. Although the book is structured by the 'journey back' in time and towards the home town of her childhood, it is ultimately about the impossibility of the return. In *Kindheitsmuster*, the narrator describes her past self as something entirely other, and marks this by referring to her in the third person, as 'the child', or 'Nelly'. This split is described as caused by the adult's failure to acknowledge her childhood self:

Because it is hard to admit that this child ... can't be reached by you. ... it has been left by the adult who has hatched from it and who over time

⁴² See Ruth Ginsburg (1992) 'In Pursuit of Self: Theme, Narration, and Focalization in Christa Wolf's *Patterns of Childhood*.' In: *Style* 26: 3, Fall 1992, pp. 437-46.

managed to do all those things to the child that adults usually do to children: she has left it behind, pushed it aside, she has forgotten it, repressed it, disowned it, modified it, distorted it, mollycoddled and neglected it, has been ashamed of it or boasted about it, she has loved it for the wrong reasons and hated it for the wrong reasons. Now, even though it is impossible, she wants to get to know it. (*Kindheitsmuster*, pp. 12-13)

Her autobiographical project attempts to confront the past in order to be able to get rid of it, but this is doomed to failure, because her past self remains elusive *and* because the past refuses to go away. The statement made at the beginning of the book, 'the past is not dead, it is not even past' (p. 9) holds true. Once remembering becomes a compulsion, the past threatens to engulf the present: 'You can sit there until the end of your life, remembering, writing down your memories, living and reflecting on life. But that's dangerous. You have to put a stop to it, before it puts a stop to you.' (p. 90)

The process of autobiographical writing makes the narrator aware of the paradox 'that you can't live while you are describing life. That you can't describe life if you don't live.' (p. 282) Moreover, the child proves resistant to the narrator's attempts at understanding it. Thus, any effort to make the child 'speak' turns into an act of violence, likened to the terrifying 'You are going to talk yet' of the torturer (p. 49). Remembering, that is, looking at herself as if other, causes a split in the narrator's image of self and initiates a constant dialogue with herself, addressing herself as 'you' and the child as

‘she’: ‘a game in and with the second and third person singular, with the aim of reuniting them’ (p. 149). In the end, the narrator confesses that the aim of the autobiography—to get rid of the power the past has over her and thus to reintegrate the child (she) and the narrator (you) into a single I—cannot be achieved, and the narrator’s authoritative first person singular can only be reclaimed in a gesture of disavowal: ‘I don’t know.’ (378)

In Eva Hoffman’s *Lost In Translation* it is the move from Poland to Canada that causes the fatal split from the past. After that, the protagonist’s sense of time, and thereby of self-in-time, is temporarily suspended:

I can’t afford to look back, and I can’t figure out how to look forward. In both directions I see a Medusa, and I already feel the danger of being turned into stone. Betwixt and between, I am stuck and time is stuck with me. ... I arrest the past, and I hold myself stiffly against the future; I want to stop the flow. (*Lost in Translation*, p. 117)

The image of being turned ‘into stone’ like Lot’s wife when looking back is a recurring motif. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* Jeanette Winterson’s narrator encounters the dilemma that she cannot separate herself from her past, but knows that when she turns back, she will become immobile, turned into a pillar of salt like Lot’s wife.⁴³ Caught in the ‘psychological deep-

⁴³ Jeanette Winterson (1985 [1991]) *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. London: Vintage, p. 155. For a discussion of gender and the perils of remembering that discusses the motif of Lot’s wife, see Janice Haaken (1998) *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

freeze', the protagonist finds herself trapped in a forced return to the origin:

'I seemed to have run in a great circle, and met myself again on the starting line.'⁴⁴ Looking back either gives a traumatic past renewed hold over the autobiographical self, or it prevents going forward in time, arresting the protagonist in a 'betwixt and between' space, held in place by nostalgia.

However, for Hoffman's narrator, being cut off from her childhood home and her mother tongue creates a split within the autobiographical I itself. She is in a constant dialogue with an inner, Polish-speaking voice. The narrator imagines herself as she might have been had she not left Poland, an earnest, politically aware teenager smoking cigarettes with student intellectuals in cafés buzzing with political discussions. Instead, she has become a shy American college girl grappling with the intricacies of becoming 'feminine', the behaviour codes of dating and general well-adjustedness. The Cracow self is described as the 'more real' one, but she gradually fades away because the cultural context is not there: 'In a few years, I'll have no idea what her hairdo would have been like.' (p. 120) The split from her first language also affects the narrator's sense of self. For Christa Wolf's narrator, it was the process of remembering that made her think of herself as 'you', for Hoffman's narrator, it is the loss of the language that gave her a sense of self, of 'being I':

⁴⁴ Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, p. 168.

It seems that, when I write (or, for that matter, think) in English, I am unable to use the word 'I'. I do not go as far as the schizophrenic 'she'—but I am driven, as by compulsion, to the Siamese-twin 'you'. (p. 121)

However, after she has visited Poland, a homeland that is both familiar and startlingly unfamiliar replaces the imagined one, and the 'parallel universe' fades, leaving in its wake a regret that one has to choose, that 'one is given only one life even though so many others might have been.' (p. 241) Being cut off from the past creates not only a regret for a life, or lives, that might have been, but also a general sense of relativity:

A voice, almost unconscious, keeps performing an inaudible, perpetual triangulation ... It is just an awareness that there is another place—another point at the base of the triangle which renders this place relative, which locates me within that relativity itself. (p. 170)

The autobiographical act of giving meaning to a chain of events cannot be performed in this atmosphere of general relativity. Instead of having a sense of a unique selfhood that is only enhanced by remembering her life, the narrator can imagine many different lives in different places, and none has more validity and meaning than the others. Even the notion of a crucial decision point, after which life splits up into two possible directions, becomes meaningless in an American culture that denies that there is such a thing:

There are no such things as fatal mistakes any more, I say to my father in my mind. ... We live in a post-tragic condition. If you marry the wrong

man, you can get divorced, if you start out on a wrong career, you can retrack and start another one. ... There is no ultimate failure here ... only new branchings, new beginnings, new game plans. (p. 249)

This notion is liberating and constricting at the same time: if everything is possible, no conscious choice is of any great importance. What, in the end, gives the narrator her sense of self back is retelling her own story to herself, in English, in psychotherapy. This therapeutic autobiography causes her to perceive herself as a 'personage', 'someone who tells herself her own biography' (*Lost in Translation*, p. 270) , but the price she pays is, again, a greater distance from herself; because she is able to look at herself as if at another person, tempering 'the winds of love and hate that can blow you like a reed.' (p. 271)

Dorothy Allison's collection of autobiographical stories and essays, *Skin*, retraces the narrator's progress from abject poverty to becoming a scholarship student and, finally, a vocal lesbian writer and campaigner. The narrator's progress is defined by a series of geographical moves forward, from Carolina to California, and finally New York. However, the drawback of this pattern of moving forward, leaving the past behind, is an urge to constantly 'move on' the narrator detects in herself, a weakness for the 'geographical solution' of conflicts and difficulties, because of a deep-seated conviction that she will always be marginalised, and fighting back would be pointless. (p. 19) Cutting herself off from the past makes the narrator feel

rootless, always ready to 'move on'. On the other hand, the past proves so powerful that the narrator cannot believe in her escape. The result is another 'ghosting effect', where the narrator is haunted by what she might have been had she not been able to get away:

I had a series of dreams in which I still lived in Greenville, just down the road from where Granny died. In the dreams I had two children and only one eye, lived in a trailer, and worked at the textile mill. Most of my time was taken up with deciding when I would finally kill my children and myself. The dreams were so vivid, I became convinced that they were about the life I was meant to have had. (*Skin*, p. 21)

In order to avoid this ghost of the woman she might have become, the autobiographer has to cut herself loose from the image of her childhood, her family, and her home; she must see the child she was as fundamentally different from her present self. However, this then creates the desire to bridge this gap, to return to the foreign country of the past and rescue the child she was:

I have the ambition to be my own adolescent fantasy, to realize the science fiction fable and go back to that girl I was. I want to ... reach down and take her hands, pull her up and tell her the story she has not yet lived. (*Skin*, p. 157)

In this scenario, the utopian, the not-yet, is not realised by projecting the imagined past onto the future, but by projecting the future onto the past. In a

similar vein, Liz Stanley writes, reflecting on childhood photographs as 'slices of time preserved in amber':

The child speaks to me, it speaks to me and only me, I want to answer 'time passes' and 'things will be different'. I want to be a ridiculous knight errant to the rescue of my young damsel past, but she cannot hear, see, she only is in a perpetual present, and my heart aches for this captured child.⁴⁵

In *Tribute to Freud*, H. D. had explored the possibilities of a return to the childhood through autobiographical storytelling. Wolf, Hoffman and Allison, on the other hand, in describing a cutting off from the past, turn the past self into something utterly Other. This is partly fall-out from the autobiographical process of looking at oneself as if (an)Other, partly due to a traumatic split from childhood. Thereby, they open up the possibility of relating to the past self, but this relationship is always one-sided: the past self is part of a past that is already lost, she is 'captured' in the past, and she cannot respond.

ii. The Perils of Nostalgia

Another effect of cutting oneself off from the past, or forcibly being cut off, is nostalgia for an irretrievable past. As Carolyn Steedman argues, from the eighteenth century onwards, childhood comes to be seen as the lost paradise:

The child within was always both imminent—ready to be drawn on in various ways—and at the same time, always representative of the lost realm, lost in the individual past, and the past of the culture.⁴⁶

The perfect utopian past, then, is childhood. Hoffman argues that the places of childhood, while they seem to be small and insignificant, are ‘the first things, the incomparable things, the only things. It’s by adhering to the contours of a few childhood objects that the substance of our selves—the molten force we’re made of—moulds and shapes itself.’ (*Lost in Translation*, p. 74) Moreover, she describes how the nostalgia for childhood meshes with the nostalgia for the Poland she was forced to leave. As the ship she is travelling on leaves for Canada, the narrator is gripped by nostalgia:

I am suffering my first, severe attack of tešknota—a word that adds to the nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing. It is a feeling whose shades and degrees I’m destined to know intimately, but at this hovering moment, it comes upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions, an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt. (p. 4)

However, this nostalgia cannot be assuaged by exchanging absence for presence, by fulfilling the fantasy of return. When she meets her childhood sweetheart again, and when she revisits Poland, the narrator must admit that ‘even a fulfilment of a fantasy , it turns out, is different from a fantasy of

⁴⁵ Liz Stanley (1992) *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, p. 48.

fulfilment.' (p. 87) Nostalgia is again described as a kind of amber preserving the past as dead but beautiful:

Nostalgia—this most lyrical of feelings—crystallizes around these images like amber ... the past is clear, is vivid, made more beautiful by the medium in which it is held and by its stillness. (p. 115)⁴⁷

However, for Hoffman, *tešknota* is also a vague feeling of longing (with sexual overtones) that is turned towards nothing specific, a longing for you don't know what (pp. 20, 28). In *Outside Belongings*, Elspeth Probyn analyses accounts of childhood in lesbian and gay autobiographies, using nostalgia in a similar way, as a longing for a past that cannot be recuperated, that was never there in the first place:

Nostalgia not as a guarantee of memory but precisely as an errant logic that always goes astray. ... Nostalgia as the impossibility of placing true origins, nostalgia for an irretrievable childhood. A perfidious use that theoretically and affectively ... upsets the space and time of childhood, the naturalness of generational or heterosexual ordering.⁴⁸

With Probyn's usage of 'nostalgia', the use of childhood and home as guarantors of a seamless identity is disrupted, and thereby, implicitly, any

⁴⁶ Carolyn Steedman (1995) *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*. London: Virago, p. 10.

⁴⁷ As Ann Colley puts it: 'Like Orpheus, nostalgia attempts to recover what darkness imprisons so that it might lead what is lost back to the light of the living present. ... But, as Orpheus learns, nostalgia can never completely resurrect what it releases. The past can never join the present ... and even though one might reach out like Orpheus, to hold it, the image turns to retread its path to the underworld of the unconscious.' Ann Colley (1998) *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. 209.

autobiographical narrative that depends on these categories. I would like to argue that, within the autobiographies, the 'empty space of childhood' can be filled by origin stories and mythical retellings of a past that was never there.

However, in the case of ghosted selves and paralysing nostalgia, it is the narrative itself that goes astray, splitting into parallel stories, turning on itself to come full circle. It looks as if the device of narrative, usually employed to instil a sense of meaning in a life cannot do so due to traumatic events. Once the gap between past and present grows too large, the ghostly narrative of the self that did not go or get away attempts to bridge this gap, but succeeds only in splitting the narrator's own sense of self. Thus, instead of the meaningful (though not always stable) self created by Mark Freeman's triad of history-memory-narrative, the result is a doubling of the self: the autobiographical I is staring into the ghostly face of its *doppelgänger*, and the adult self is gripped by the desire to rescue the child that did not get away.

iii. An Avalanche of Meaning

Let us return to the problematic status of memory and its relationship to the past and present self of the autobiographer in *A Sketch of the Past*. Here, Virginia Woolf reflects on the process of writing an autobiographical text: on writing an autobiographical sketch of her individual past and on the autobiographical past in general. For her, the continuous interaction between past and present makes it impossible to either split off the past as Other or

⁴⁸ Elspeth Probyn (1996) *Outside Belongings*. New York and London: Routledge, p. 103. 170

see it as an uncomplicated same to the present. Thus, for the narrator in *A Sketch of the Past*, writing an autobiography does not consist in tracing a smooth progress from past to present, but in showing how present and past are connected and continually change each other. She puts this belief into practice by 'includ[ing] the present—at least enough of the present as a platform to stand upon' (p. 75) which means that each chapter of the essay starts with the date of writing and opens with a brief recapitulation of the narrator's present situation. Leaving this platform of the present intact shows how remembering is contingent on the moment of narration: for example, the turbulent, dangerous times of the Second World War are able to trigger memories of chaos and pain in the narrator's childhood. On the other hand, the narrator's present self remains separate from the person she was: 'it would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then come out in contrast' (p. 75).

The return to the past is at first visualised as a linear move backwards in time: 'I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes; emotions' (p. 67). Later, it is described as a move downwards beyond the surface of the present:

The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths ... the present when backed by the past is a thousand times

deeper than the present when it presses so closely that you can feel nothing else.’ (p. 98)⁴⁹

In *A Sketch of the Past* the past is described in two different ways: on the one hand, as in the extract above, the past is difficult to grasp because the present is too intense; on the other hand it is immensely real, at times more real than the present, and thus becomes in turn the surface that overlays it:

This I have just tested. For I got up and crossed the garden. Percy was digging the asparagus bed ; Louie was shaking a mat in front of the bedroom door. But I was seeing them through the sight I saw here—the nursery and the road to the beach. (p. 67)

Virginia Woolf reflects on the dilemmas and paradoxes inherent in an autobiographical project that takes on board the psychoanalytic concept that, while the foundations of the self are laid in the past, memories of this past are difficult to access and are subject to censure and distortion. This creates the haunting sense of the past I have described earlier; the conviction that ‘if only I could remember, I would understand.’ However, Woolf, in a gesture that Liz Stanley describes as crucial for feminist auto/biography,⁵⁰ also extends the boundaries of the self: just as ‘the whole flower’ is ‘part earth, part flower’ (p. 71), the self cannot be separated from its ancestry, and the

⁴⁹ Ann Colley, in *Nostalgia and Recollection*, p. 16, describes this phenomenon, again, using a photographic metaphor: ‘The past and the present rest within another like superimposed photographic negatives that print into a single double image.’

⁵⁰ ‘The baseline of a distinct feminist auto/biography is the rejection of a reductionist spotlight attention to a single unique subject ... an attention to social location and

society that surrounds it. The autobiographical self that emerges from this reflection of the past is complex, sometimes contradictory, and shaped by multiple and interrelating influences that make it impossible to fully understand it. This awareness means that, for Woolf, contrary to Taylor's definition of the 'modern autobiography', meaning is not produced by a narrative that sees it as already latent in a succession of events. In *A Sketch of the Past*, meaning emerges not from an ordered narrative that shapes the events of the narrated life but in the child's heightened awareness in those privileged moments when she is flooded by terror or ecstasy, as when 'an avalanche of meaning ... heaped itself up and discharged itself on me.' (p. 78) For the narrator, producing meaning as a writer means to be able to make productive use of those shocks, because they are 'a token of some real thing behind appearances, and I make it real by putting it into words.' (p. 72) Meaning is not situated in a sequential narrative from past to present, but in the agony and the ecstasy, those 'moments of being' where present and past overlay and shape each other.

contextualisation and in particular to subjects' position within, not apart from, their social networks.' Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p. 250.

4. Conclusion

In the above, I hope to have shown that the recreated past is shaped by the autobiographer's desire for a 'past of her own.'⁵¹ However, the past created by longing and desire exists side by side with the dreaded past:

'Utopia' contains two different references. The one is the sweet and good place we find in *Zami* ... the second is the dark vision of the suppressed and totalitarian small space of the 'dystopia' Memories of colonial childhoods draw on each of these modes and exist in the tension between them.⁵²

In most of the texts, the search for time past ends in an aporia. However, it is the recreation of a past that never was that provides sustaining heritages and the possibility to imagine a different future.

The autobiographies discussed in this chapter all stress a 'haunting' quality of the past which cannot be overcome by progressing on a linear timescale or by endowing the past with meaning from a position of hindsight. The past is at the same time elusive and overwhelming, threatening to engulf the present, and one might speculate that this is exacerbated because the narrated

⁵¹ Adriana Cavarero has suggested that the driving force behind autobiography is the desire for unity of the self, a unity that can only be recreated by combining one's own narrative with that of other people. Adriana Cavarero (1997 [2000]) *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul A. Kottmann. London and New York: Routledge.

⁵² Gillian Whitlock (2000) *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*. London: Cassell, p. 180. I believe, though, that this rule applies not only to autobiographies of colonial childhoods.

events are traumatic; because of the experience of abuse, witnessing the Third Reich, expulsion from the childhood home, the death of the mother, for example. The past self is always part of the present self; yet it is, at the same time, utterly Other and inexplicable. Present and past interact and mingle constantly, and every attempt of 'getting rid' of the past is thwarted, as is every attempt of fully understanding a present self by analysing memories. On the other hand, there is a constant sense of the importance of remembering, of understanding how past experience has shaped the autobiographer's self, how she came to live the life she lived. Thus, the typical pattern followed by the autobiographical I is that of a split from the past (voluntary or forcible) that is then followed by the adult narrator's attempt to reconnect herself to her past and retrace her own (matrilineal) heritage.

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory.¹

(Virginia Woolf)

Chapter Six

First Memories

1. Self and Memory

In this chapter, I will further develop some of the ideas presented in Chapter Five. I have argued, following Paul Ricoeur, that the past can be seen as ‘the same’ to the present or as completely Other, and that the past is described by the autobiographers as both ‘the same’ and ‘Other’. In the following pages, I will look at what I think is a kind of origin story where ‘the same’, ‘the Other’ and other people, are inextricably entangled: the story of the first memory, and, by extension, other early memories as well. The first memory is, in my opinion, another one of the ‘conjunctural moments of selfhood’, where the self and Other/others as well as the self and various discourses (in this case, of subjectivity and memory) are inextricably interconnected.

I have already briefly touched on the ways in which, in psychoanalytic thinking, the origins of the self are reconstructed through memory. Since the first memory is the earliest point where the narrator’s conscious self is accessible to herself in the present, it seems to emerge, in retrospect, from a state of pre-consciousness

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Sketch of the Past*, p. 64.

at exactly that moment.² On the other hand, the first memory cannot exist without a connection to 'other people's stories', the stories parents tell to their children. However, the status of the first memory as 'real memory' depends on whether it can be established as independent from the parents' stories, or family photographs. Richard Coe, in his book on the 'Childhood', that is, the distinctive genre of childhood autobiographies, notes that there seems to be a kind of contest between autobiographers for the earliest first memory.³ The desire to establish independent memories as early as possible could be seen as the autobiographer's attempt to extend the control of the conscious, autonomous self as far backwards as possible. This would tie in with the findings of Shari Benstock and other Lacanian theorists of autobiography who argue that autobiography lends itself to producing a fictitious, autonomous I that covers over the essentially split nature of the self.⁴ However, the first memory does not straightforwardly serve to ensure the control of the autonomous self: it is precisely the presence of witnesses that is required to verify the memory that calls that its authenticity into question.⁵ Moreover, the autobiographical self's

² Patricia Bauer et al. argue that, once the child acquires a sense of self, it is retrospectively introduced into 'episodic' memories that exist from the time before; that is, retrospectively 'autobiographical' memories can exist even for a period where there is no sense of self. Patricia Bauer et al. (1998) 'If Memory Serves, Will Language? Later Verbal Accessibility of Early Memories.' In: *Development and Psychopathology* 10: 4, Fall 1998, pp. 655-79.

³ Richard Coe (1984) *When the Grass was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 96.

⁴ Shari Benstock (1988) 'Authorizing the Autobiographical.' In: Shari Benstock (1988) ed. *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 10-33.

⁵ See Richard Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 98. When I asked friends and relatives to tell me their first memory, some had a very typical first memory (a visual image that is understood only in retrospect or explained by others), others (myself included) had no significant first memory at all.

point of origin itself, the moment of birth, cannot (at least according to the majority of developmental psychologists) be remembered by the autobiographer and is only accessible through the stories s/he is told.

The interaction between self, memory and narrative that I want to trace in a series of first memory episodes becomes more complex because of the different possible approaches to what a memory is and how memory works. Since the field of 'memory studies' is huge, encompassing, among others, the disciplines of psychology, neurology, history and cultural studies, I have had to employ an eclectic approach to the secondary material I am going to use in this chapter. For an overview on theories of memory that focuses on the issues of gender and memory, I have used Janice Haaken's *Pillar of Salt*,⁶ and June Crawford and her colleagues' *Emotion and Gender*.⁷ I have included some psychological accounts of first memories, as well as the philosophical theories developed by Walter Benjamin and Christine Battersby in order to provide a theoretical context for the first memories related in the autobiographies. All these theoretical accounts of memory were incorporated because they proved useful for understanding what is going on within the autobiographical texts I discuss. As a tool for analysing the texts, I have identified three 'ideal types' of memories informed by different discourses of memory (though the memories

⁶ Janice Haaken (1998) *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

⁷ June Crawford et al. (1992) *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning from Memory*. London: Sage.

described sometimes fall between the categories); and I have called them the 'snapshot memory', the 'narrative memory' and the 'super-memory'.

i. The Snapshot Memory

According to Richard Coe, this photographic kind of memory is typical for a first memory that is described in an autobiography: 'Archetypically, the first memory is a clear picture, like a still photograph ... It is the detached visual image which predominates, very often the image of a step or a staircase, a door or a window'⁸ Photographic metaphors are very common in descriptions of memories that comprise a highly detailed image or sensory impression of one single moment. Walter Benjamin describes this kind of memory:

More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room's image on the plate.⁹

The modern equivalent of this description is the flashbulb or 'Print Now' theory of memory, where a deeply felt moment seems to imprint an everyday situation (where were you when you heard that President Kennedy was shot) in the memory. However, Janice Haaken contends that 'emotionally vivid events do not necessarily produce accurate memories' and that this theory reduces

⁸ Richard Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 96.

⁹ Walter Benjamin (1932 [1997]) 'A Berlin Chronicle.' In: *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: Verso, pp. 193-346; p. 343.

complex emotional reactions to 'mere snapshots.'¹⁰ The photographic metaphor is a strange mixture of the psychological and the technological, because it requires two elements for the production of a memory: the technical apparatus of 'engraving' the memory on the brain, and a strong emotion to trigger the process of engraving. Thus, there is a curious dissonance between the mundane image (Walter Benjamin's familiar room, the everyday activities of the people who heard that Kennedy was shot) and the shock that imprints it.

A similar metaphor is that of the camera, famously used by Christopher Isherwood: 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking ... Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.'¹¹ Here, not even the flashbulb of a shock is needed for the engraving process: the camera records indiscriminately. However, the narrator retains the agency of later reviewing the material and thereby assigning meaning to it.

Linda Mizejewski has argued that Benjamin's shocklike photography and Isherwood's camera metaphor 'point(s) to a specific kind of perception made possible in the first decades of the twentieth century ... particularly ... in regard to the multiple "shocks" of modern history for the subject who feels positioned like the helpless, passive spectator.'¹² Christa Wolf is very scathing about those claiming this kind of helpless spectatorship; instead, she argues that the images

¹⁰ Janice Haaken, *Pillar of Salt*, p. 53.

¹¹ Christopher Isherwood, quoted in Linda Mizejewski (1992) *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 37.

¹² Linda Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence*, p. 40.

of memory that seem to be exact snapshots have become edited and falsified in the service of exonerating the spectator.

The 'snapshot' theory of memory is closely related to Marcel Proust's earlier concept of 'involuntary memory' that is concerned not with the origins of the memory, but its retrieval. Proust believes that the most significant and detailed memories are not found by conscious attempts at remembering, but remain forgotten until a cue from the present (like the famous taste of the *madeleine*) revives an image of a moment in the past, a 'total recall' in every sensory detail.¹³ However impressive, in both frameworks the 'snapshot' memory requires a cue outside the self or a photographic flash to be recalled or imprinted, and the person who remembers is reduced to being a passive spectator of his or her own memories. Consequently, because the self is bound up with the memories, access to this self is accidental: Walter Benjamin argues that 'according to Proust, it is a matter of chance whether the individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience.'¹⁴ In order to be infused with meaning, the single memory has to be reviewed and bound up in a personal narrative.¹⁵

¹³ See Richard Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 87.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin (1939 [1970]) 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.' In: *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn. London: Fontana, pp. 152-190; p. 157.

¹⁵ Alida Westman and Gary Wautier's research confirms their Adlerian standpoint that first and early memories are valuable for interpretations of later events in life: 'early memories helped see consistency and interpret events.' Alida Westman and Gary Wautier (1994) 'Early

ii. Narrative Memories

In a different context (describing the myths of origin of nations) Benedict Anderson makes another connection between memories and photographs. What he describes is not a memory that is like a snapshot, but a sense of identity that is acquired by creating memories that fit in with actual photographs. For Anderson, the sense of identity that is crucial for autobiography emerges out of amnesia. Faced with a photograph that documents the child one cannot remember to have been, one is driven to autobiographical storytelling:

How strange it is to need another's help to learn that this naked baby in the photograph, ... is you. ... Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* ... which, because it can not be remembered, must be narrated.¹⁶

The sense of identity is here caused by the technical possibility of the family photograph: it produces the blank that has to be filled with storytelling. This recreation of one's origin forms an identity that functions in 'homogenous, empty time.'¹⁷ It does not allow for changes, and thus guarantees a stable self

Memories are Only Fragments, But Make Life More Comprehensible.' In: *Psychological Reports* 75, pp. 387-393.

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso, p. 204.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 204. 'Homogenous, empty time' is a term coined by Walter Benjamin. In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' he argues that 'history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but a time filled by the presence of the now.' Walter Benjamin (1940 [1970]) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History.' In: *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn. London: Fontana, pp. 247-55. According to Adrian Wilding, 'the element of memory ... which points towards "moments" and "discontinuities" is Benjamin's touchstone in his critique of homogenous time.' Adrian Wilding (1996) 'The Concept of Remembrance in Walter Benjamin.' PhD thesis, University of Warwick, p. 182.

that stays the same. Thus, for Anderson, autobiographical storytelling serves to paper over a void of amnesia that might threaten the idea of an autonomous self.

However, for many recent theories of memory, and for psychoanalysts, the guiding principle is not ‘what cannot be remembered must be narrated,’ but ‘what is remembered must be narrated.’ Janice Haaken describes the gradual development of scientific models of memory that differ from the conventional ‘storehouse’ model that views memory as the storage of data and forgetting as a physical process of decay. The newer approaches develop a more flexible model that takes the significance of emotions and personal narratives into account.¹⁸

For Haaken, memory cannot be separated from storytelling: ‘... psychoanalysis understands autobiographical memory as a means of organising and structuring the self through narrative.’¹⁹ If memory is a means of structuring the self through narrative, the retelling of first and early memories contributes to a myth of origin of the self: ‘The effort to identify ... the source of selfhood as it is presently constituted, out of the contours of these more ambiguous vistas of

¹⁸ J. Haaken, *Pillar of Salt*, pp. 39-59. Haaken’s central argument is that the ‘False Memory Syndrome’ debate threatens to obliterate this ‘storytelling’ aspect of memory, because it blurs the boundary between ‘true or false’ memories in the legal sense of the word. Haaken attempts to solve the crucial dilemma for feminist psychologists (to avoid playing into the hands of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, they must insist on the literal truth of every memory broached in therapy, thereby cutting themselves off from perhaps vital means of understanding memory) by paying close attention to the psychological and social context of the memory and the inequality of ‘storytelling rights’ in the case of conflicting vantage points on the past.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

self/other representations becomes a creative act—much like creation mythologies.’²⁰

iii. The Super-Memory

In *Tribute to Freud*, H. D. describes another type of memory which resembles the ‘snapshot’ memory of the detailed image. But instead of being frozen in time like the snapshot, this kind of memory seems to transcend time:

... but here and there a memory or a fragment of a dream-picture is actual, is real, is like a work of art or is a work of art. I have spoken of the two scenes with my brother as remaining set apart, like transparencies in a dark room, set before a lighted candle. Those memories, visions, dreams, reveries, or what you will, are different. ... They are healing. They are real. ... But we cannot prove that they are real. (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 35)

These ‘real memories’ are ‘in a sense super-memories; they are ordinary, “normal” memories but retained with so vivid a detail that they become almost events out of time’. (p. 43) And whereas the ‘snapshot’ memories can be preceived as split off from the self, the super-memories seem to transcend the self, as in H. D.’s ‘archetypal’ memories of father-son conflict (related to the Prometheus myth) or the brother-sister bond (related to the Isis and Osiris myth); or to overpower the self, as in H. D.’s half-symptomatic, half-visionary state of mind where the ‘writing on the wall’ becomes visible. In describing

²⁰ Ibid., p. 252.

how the shock that engraves the memory momentarily obliterates the self, Walter Benjamin takes the photographic metaphor one step further. A memory is imprinted by a flashlight, but it is the person that remembers who 'goes up in flames' in the process:

... such moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we are beside ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match.²¹

Within the autobiographies, especially those of H. D., Virginia Woolf and Eva Hoffman, these 'super-memories' or 'moments of being' reach across time and melt down the boundaries between past and present self, narrator and protagonist. They become one in an invocation of the 'I am' in a heightened, mythical present tense, similar to the 'mythological time' that H. D. described in *Tribute to Freud*.

iv. Layers of Memories

It should have become clear that memories can upset the chronological order of the classical autobiographical narrative. Walter Benjamin employs another pervasive metaphor for the process of remembering: that of the archaeologist excavating the buried past (similar to the 'vertical' time frame I have discussed

²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'A Berlin Chronicle', p. 343.

above). For him, found memories are not only fragments of the past that suddenly burst in on the present, but interact with the present, because they remain connected to the moment when they were remembered:

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences ... For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields ... the real treasure within the earth: the images ... And it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discoveries, and not this dark joy of the place of the finding itself.²²

Here, the memories, or rather, images that are fragments of memories, are doubly connected: to other memories that form the stratum in the earth, and to the time and place of remembering. According to Harold Rosen, a frequent phenomenon in autobiographical memory is the memory-of-a-memory, which touches again on the problem of reliability—is the earlier memory confirmed by the greater accuracy of the later memory, or is the later memory a distortion of the earlier one? ²³ Sidonie Smith argues that it is not possible to separate 'pure memory' from subsequent rememberings and experience:

Memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience, so that recovering the past is not a hypostasizing of ... absolute origins but, rather, an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be

²² Walter Benjamin, 'A Berlin Chronicle', p. 314.

²³ Harold Rosen (1998) *Speaking from Memory: The Study of Autobiographical Discourse*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, pp. 125-6.

divorced from the filterings of subsequent experience or articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling.²⁴

In the following pages, I will explore the connections between self, memory and origin that become apparent in the first memories. I hope to show that autobiographical storytelling does not necessarily serve to produce stable selves and homogenous identities. The difficulties of memory disturb the creation of stable selves and simple, chronological narratives in various ways: a snapshot memory can be seen as an alien element within a self that is perceived as continuous in time; a narrative memory raises questions of authenticity and connects the self to other people; a super-memory, in making a direct connection between past and present, upsets the chronological order of the autobiographical narrative.

The first memory episodes analysed in this chapter could be described as myths of origin of the self, describing the emergence of consciousness, the discovery of the 'I', and the characteristic sense of exultation of being here, of being alive that many autobiographers relate. Moreover, I would like to argue that those first memories show a self that is not cut off from the Other, but entangled with the Other: with the stories of others that are entwined with the first memories; with the body of the mother in stories of birth; with the shock of the realisation that there was a time when the child was not there, or might as well have never

²⁴ Sidonie Smith (1987) *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of*

been born. What will emerge out of a reading of these first memory episodes as well is the strong sense of location, of being in St. Ives, or in Cracow, and that the child's identity is constructed not only in relation to other people, but in relation to places as well. Moreover, as I will explore in more detail further on, the relationship between memory and narrative makes it possible to overcome the isolation of the self and claim a more general 'family' narrative as one's own.

I will begin with a reading of the stories of birth and self-creating in *That's How it Was* and *Kindheitsmuster* (connected to the 'narrative' model of memory and selfhood), then go on to describing Christa Wolf's description of a first memory and of the 'family snapshots' that structure the narrator's memories, and finally, I will explore the self-transcending memories in Virginia Woolf's *A Sketch of the Past* and Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*.

2. Creating the Self: Stories of Birth

According to Christine Battersby, the fact that selves are born presents a major difficulty for a concept of the self as autonomous: on the one hand, the mother's body is inhabited by another (potential) self, on the other hand, while the person is a foetus, is born, or is a child dependent on parents, he or she cannot be 'autonomous' in the classical sense. Telling the story of a friend who said that 'when I try to think of my own birth, my brain goes all red', Battersby remarks:

Of course, as the man knew well, it is absurd not to accept that one has been born. But this man's remark ... reveals a central failure in our culture.

Philosophers have notably failed to address the ontological significance of the fact that selves are born. ... We carry on idealizing autonomous

'individuals' who have equal rights and duties, and look away from the fact that 'persons' only become such by first moving out of a state of foetal and childhood dependency on others.²⁵

Retelling the story of her birth, the autobiographer addresses this dependency on others: on relatives to tell her the story of her birth, and on her mother who gave birth to her. On the other hand, she is herself retelling the story, gaining control over it, and breaching the self-other divide between what can and what cannot be remembered.²⁶ While doing so, she broadens the boundaries of self, but retains a sense of location, a sense of 'this is where I come from.' In her autobiographical novel *That's How it Was*, Maureen Duffy has her narrator tell the story of her birth from a 'fly on the wall' perspective. This birth is described as a traumatic event: it happens in poverty-stricken circumstances (the doctor is reluctant to attend, the landlady does the job of the midwife), and her mother

²⁵ Christine Battersby (1998) *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*. Oxford: Polity Press, p. 3.

²⁶ Adriana Cavarero, in *Relating Narratives*, makes this connection between natality and narrativity: 'The tale of her beginnings, the story of her birth, nevertheless can only come into the existent in the form of a narration told by others. ... Autobiographical memory always recounts a story that is incomplete from the beginning. It is necessary to go back to the narration told by others. ... If it wants to begin with birth, autobiography is in fact always a *refabulation* of a story told by others. But it wants to begin with birth, because that which sustains it is the desire for unity that only the narration can offer in a tangible form. Adriana Cavarero (1997 [2000]) *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul A. Kottmann. London and New York: Routledge, p. 39.

almost dies. The narrator begins her story with 'Lucky for me that I was born at all' (p. 13) and this double sense of the pain and danger of her birth and of the miracle of her own and her mother's survival is pervasive throughout the narrative. The realistic descriptions of drabness and poverty do not only stress the precariousness of the child self, but also locate the narrator as working-class. This 'locating' is then taken further by narrating the story of her mother's childhood in the next chapter. The narrator is defined as part of a family, and the memories about her birth are not her own ('I don't know, of course. It was my own fault after all and she could only tell me after.' (p. 13)). They are part of a 'family memory':

Sometimes I just can't tell any more what happened to me and what I was told by my mother or someone else, and what I just would have liked to have happened. If there's a race memory there is certainly a family memory, a rubbish-tip of anecdotes, jokes, tinsel-phrases, tarnished photographs, ... obscure chronologies I'm once again left with family memory, that rag-bag to sort through, and my own twisted skeins and rags of remembrance. ... Naturally it's the brightly coloured scraps of near poetry ... that catch the eye, not the dull browns and the dun duckerty everyday. (pp. 16-17)

Thus, memories do not necessarily 'belong' to one individual. Janice Haaken describes the phenomenon of 'memory theft', when a person appropriates somebody else's memory as one's own (in her own case, her sister's). However,

Source amnesia ... is a common type of memory error. ... Yet simply characterizing this minor episode as source amnesia or 'false memory'

misses an important aspect of remembering. ... While it is important to preserve the rich specificity of individual memories, we also need categories for thinking about collective remembering. We need memory metaphors, legends and myths, even as we recognize how and where such products may merge into autobiographical recall.²⁷

In the spirit of 'collective memory', Duffy's narrator does not attempt to separate her own memories from those of others, but has her add her own 'rags of remembrance' to the rag-bag of the 'family memory', and the family memory is itself created by the collaborative storytelling of 'do you remember when ...',²⁸ Family memory is also created by assigning the role of memory keeper and storyteller to members of the family. Dorothy Allison admits to 'memory theft' in the writing of her autobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*:

My sisters do not remember all of our childhood, and one of the roles I have played in our families is being the one who gives it back to them. ... What I had to do in the year after I finished my novel was sit down with my little sister. ... I had to say, 'That page is true. It didn't happen to me though, it happened to you.' (*Skin*, p. 56)

²⁷ Janice Haaken, *Pillar of Salt*, p. 110.

²⁸ See Harold Rosen, *Speaking from Memory*, p. 132. For Rosen, the concept of 'collective memory' also includes collective commemoration on a larger, national scale, as Empire Days and Remembrance Days: see also Paul Connerton (1989) *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Maurice Halbwachs (1941/52 [1992]) *On Collective Memory*. Edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. Because I am looking at personal and family stories that stress marginal communities (women, lesbians, working-class networks), I will not address this well-theorised connection between collective memory and nation.

The story of the narrator's birth becomes her own in the retelling, but the sources of her self are located in her mother's body, other family members, other people's memories, and her social background.²⁹ The story of the birth is a narrative of origin that depends on the connection to the mother as well as the separation from her. If, as Donna Haraway argues, 'an origin story [is] a time machine for beginning history, therefore outside of history',³⁰ Maureen Duffy's origin story is the beginning of her narrator's (personal) history, but embedded in the history of her family. Thus, she avoids the sharp cut between self and not-self demanded by theorists that see separation from the mother as the condition of individuality (and therefore the beginning of history) and cast the mother in the role of a mere 'pretext of history.'³¹

Another act of self-creation is described in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*.

Here, it is not the story of the birth that is narrated, but the child's reconstruction of how her parents got together. When the child realises, for the first time, that she might have not been born at all, she reacts first by imagining not being there in a 'reduction of all the parts of her body into nothingness' (p. 84); then by recalling in detail the stories she has heard of her parents getting

²⁹ However, Lynn Z. Bloom remarks that in autobiographies by daughters, 'the daughter-as-autobiographer ... becomes the recreator of her maternal parent and the controlling adult in their literary relationship.' Lynn Z. Bloom (1980) 'Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Women's Autobiographies.' In Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, eds. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, New York: Ungar, p. 292.

³⁰ Donna Haraway (1992) *Primate Visions. Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. London and New York: Verso, p. 292.

³¹ Ibid., p. 280.

together. The implausibility of this happening leads to the belief in divine providence: 'There was a magic chain, and its miraculous links were put together by the Lord himself' (ibid.) Linking herself to the family memory protects the child from the void of not being there. This is similar to Adriana Cavarero's replacing of the morbid fixation on death and not-being with an awareness of natality in *In Spite of Plato*:

the mother is the threshold between myself ... and the world, where without my mother I could have never been. ... The theoretical possibility of not being here at all, of not having been born, is not at all frightening when contemplated from my concrete sense of being my mother's daughter In this case, it is precisely the fortuitous element that sparks our curiosity and draws the gaze backwards to the infinite chain of mothers.³²

The origin myth of natality, then, might be an origin myth that does not cut off the daughter from the mother, nor narrate a heroic emergence of 'Man' from a feminised Nature, as in Haraway's analysis. However, for Christa Wolf's childhood self, the awareness of the precariousness of the self, the possibility of not being born, is not only replaced by a recourse to generations of mothers (and fathers), but also displaced by a pious, 'pre-modern' assumption of a divine providence that displays an interest in the child. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Charles Taylor argues that the 'modern' autobiographical

³² Adriana Cavarero (1995) *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. Translated by Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healey. Oxford: Polity Press, p. 118-19.

storytelling that shapes meaning out of the arbitrary elements of a 'life' replaces the pre-modern reliance on divine providence that until then gave meaning to a life. However, the idea of divine providence resurfaces in Jeanette Winterson's decidedly postmodern autobiography, where she, ironically, likens the birth of her protagonist to that of Christ: 'And so it was that on a particular day, some time later, she [the adoptive mother] followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in the crib, a child. A child with too much hair.'³³ Winterson makes fun of the adoptive mother's firm belief that 'this Child is mine from the Lord,'³⁴ but the analogy to the Christ child describes a sense of a purposefulness of life that sustains the narrator even after she has lost her faith. Recreating one's own birth, or the circumstances that led to it, is always an acknowledgement of the precariousness of selves that are born. However, the autobiographers also express the origins of the self as miracle. As Maureen Duffy puts it: 'All nativities are the Nativity'. (*That's How it Was*, p. xi)

3. Treacherous Memories and Family Snapshots

First and early memories are notoriously hard to verify; nevertheless, research on early memories has recently been preoccupied with the question whether or not early memories (especially of trauma and abuse) are reliable or not.³⁵ The textbooks I have consulted say that autobiographical memory is usually reliable,

³³ Jeanette Winterson (1985 [1991]) *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. London: Vintage, p. 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

but that memories can be influenced by others; and that one should not expect detailed memories that go back farther than the age of three in older children or adults (though simple, visual memories are possible).³⁶ Richard Coe notes that ‘among the problems concerning the accuracy of memory which the Childhood raises, that of the authenticity of very early recollections is among the most challenging.’³⁷ In *Kindheitsmuster*, Christa Wolf addresses this issue of the reliability of memory. The ideal childhood memory would be one that could be verified by the parents, but only after the parents themselves have had to figure out what exactly it is that is remembered. Wolf’s narrator describes her first childhood memory:

Why does the child forget its earliest years, only to remember a singular scene that nobody is going to believe. (But you can’t remember this, you weren’t even three years old and still sitting in the high chair.) ... The image is silent, and marked out as ancient because of its pale original colouring that leaks away closer to the margins. ... The image is not complete, which means it cannot be a photograph. The mother to the right. Laughing, beaming. ... The father’s [frozen] red fingers count money on the table. ... The banal explanation, so many years later: The father has counted his first takings from the new shop (p. 38)

³⁵ See Janice Haaken, *Pillar of Salt*.

³⁶ See Martin A. Conway (1990) *Autobiographical Memory: An Introduction*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press; and Alan D. Baddeley (1997) *Human Memory: Theory and Practice*. Hove: Psychology Press.

³⁷ Richard Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 98.

The problem of the accuracy of memory is especially charged for the narrator, because for her, remembering is always overshadowed by the German people's desire to forget the atrocities that happened in the Third Reich and their own complicity in them. Richard Coe, echoing Goethe's famous autobiographical *Poetry and Truth*, argues that childhood autobiographies encompass 'the poet's truth rather than the historian's accuracy.'³⁸ However, because she wants to use her childhood memories as material for a 'case study', it is the historian's accuracy that the narrator is after, and not the poetic truth. Yet memory can not be trusted: there is the frightening possibility that people really forgot having read about the opening of the first concentration camps in the newspaper; so that the circumstances of the total war produced a corresponding total amnesia (*Kindheitsmuster*, p. 42). Explanations of memory as a chemical process, delivered by a TV scientist, triggers a fantasy of 'an entire people asleep, a people whose dreaming brains follow orders: to erase, erase, erase.' (p. 141) Memory is guilty of a tendency to falsify, to prefer 'serenity and harmony' (p. 40) and the narrator has to outwit it to produce accurate memories: 'Memory, helpless once you've hit its weak spot, surrenders the whole living room, piece by piece ...' (p. 23) This view of memory as problematic informs the recounting of a 'textbook' memory where the child discovers the self and the possibilities of language at the same time:

But you can offer an authentic memory [Erinnerung], albeit a bit frayed at the edges, because it is more than unlikely that somebody else saw the child

³⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

and later told it that they saw it sitting on a stone step in front of its father's shop and reciting the new word in its mind, *IIIII* The episode is verified. The stone step (it is really there, you'll see it again, after thirty-six years, lower than expected; but who wouldn't know in this day and age that the places of childhood tend to shrink?). The irregular cobblestones that lead to the ... door. The stiff-limbed doll The smell of the doll's hair, after all these years. But the child itself? No image. This is where the lie would begin. (p. 11)

This passage addresses several of the issues connected to childhood memory. At first hand, it seems to be typical instance of a clear snapshot of a memory. It could be an instance of Proustian 'total recall', where a moment is remembered in every sensory detail. However, in Wolf's description, the ironic tone makes it clear that the narrator definitely doesn't trust her memory: it is too good to be true, too pat, and might be produced, if not by a family story, then by her later interest in developmental psychology. The desire to nevertheless verify the first memory as a memory and not as an illusion or somebody else's story, is a recurring feature in childhood autobiographies; and it might be because of the wish to pinpoint the moment where, in retrospect, the self is seen to emerge. Definitely, in Wolf's description, the first memory locates her on the threshold between 'her father's house' and the world outside, and is placed at the point of separation from the parents. The child's saying 'I' to herself is described as an illicit pleasure, and, when she goes into the house, she does so slowly, because 'the child that felt a shudder when it said I to itself for the first time in its life, is

no longer pulled in by the mother's voice as if by a taut string.' (p. 12)

However, as I have argued before, the need to verify this moment where the self emerges lets the doubt creep in: it is because there must not be any witnesses who could back up the story, the narrator is left with circumstantial evidence: the stone step is still there, even the doll might still exist; but what does it prove?

The characteristic feature of the snapshot memory is that it is insular, and needs to be embedded in a narrative that explains it. On the other hand, the 'banal' explanation of the detailed childhood memory tends to flatten it out, to reduce it to a developmental cliché. Although the explaining narrative constructs the self, the snapshot memories themselves cause a split between past and present self, autobiographical I and narrator. In the memory of 'saying I' (although the self is, in retrospect, seen to emerge at the point where the child says 'I' to itself) the child's self is absent from the image. 'But the child itself? No image. That's where the lie would begin.' Because the self is structured and changed by narrative time, the self and the singular memory cannot both be present at the same time.³⁹ Because 'memory [Gedächtnis]⁴⁰ has sat crouched within this

³⁹ See Ruth Ginsburg (1992) 'In Pursuit of Self: Theme, Narration, and Focalization in Christa Wolf's *Patterns of Childhood*.' In: *Style* 26: 3, Fall 1992, pp. 437-46, p. 443: '[In *Kindheitsmuster*], narrative convention that mobilizes techniques to present the narrated subject as focalizer is an illusion and is exposed as such. Memory is always of the present and can never be purged of its moment.'

⁴⁰ The German language allows for a distinction between the faculty of memory, or the sum of all memories (Gedächtnis) and the actual memory (Erinnerung). Thus, the potential of remembering, or the narrative comprising single memories can be described as continuous in time, while a single memory represents a moment in time. Christa Wolf traces the etymology

child, and outlasted it' (p. 11), it has irrecoverably changed, and the gap between the adult narrator self and the childhood self becomes unbridgeable. The narrator cannot assume the voice of the child any more and resolves this difficulty by a recourse to reconstruction. By referring to the child in the third person, as 'Nelly', and describing her from the position of a sometimes wryly ironic omniscient narrator, she does not lay claim to the absolute truthfulness of her reconstruction of the past. Paradoxically, the scene that described the child gaining the position of an autonomous self leads to a suspension of the 'I' and the acknowledgement of the impossibility for the adult narrator to understand herself as a child. The self that emerges from the 'snapshot' model of memory is, as Benjamin claimed, an alienated self: because of the contingency of remembering, and because the preserved moments from the past are at odds with the narrative continuity that connects a coherent self with a meaningful life story.

Benedict Anderson argues (as quoted above) that the 'narrative' sense of identity is generated from technically reproducible documents that force the autobiographer to narrate that what cannot be remembered. In Wolf's chapter on 'family snapshots', the situation is more complex: while 'real' memories must be distinguishable from family photographs, the photographs themselves

of the word (related words are to think, to thank, to commemorate, and thus reverent commemoration is implied in the word *Gedächtnis*, a tradition that the narrator is committed to break); moreover, she sees it as a process, 'no organ, but an activity and the ability for it, in one word.' (*Kindheitsmuster*, p. 15)

are only preserved in memory: the actual images were lost when the family had to flee from their home. Eva Hoffman has described this loss of family photographs 'during the war', albeit in different circumstances, as a complete 'cut from the past.' (*Lost in Translation*, p. 8)⁴¹ For Wolf's narrator, 'photographs that have been gazed at long and hard don't burn easily. They are etched into memory as immutable still images, and it doesn't matter whether you can produce them as proof.' (p. 29-30) In the chapter titled 'Family Snapshots', the narrator proceeds to recreate the family snapshots as a series of narrated sketches: her favourite photograph of herself as a naked three-year old in the woods, crowned with oak leaves; photographs of her parents and relatives on a trip to the countryside. These pictures seem idyllic (the child as the embodiment of 'nature', the laughing faces of the relatives); but there is a sense of dread: the adults talk ominously about hard times that might come, and the father's song of a soldier who dies in battle points forward to the possibility of war. In retrospect, it becomes clear how well the image of the naked child crowned with oak leaves would fit into Nazi aesthetics. The idyll is completely destroyed shortly afterwards, when the narrator recounts a memory of her father proudly showing her his National Socialist Party cap (his sports club had been swallowed up by one of the Party organisations), and the narrator notes the parents' guilty pleasure in being again part of the majority while having joined one of its more 'harmless' organisations.

⁴¹ Whereas Wolf's narrator can remember family members, most of Hoffman's family was killed in the Holocaust before she was born, and it is only by witnessing her parents' grief

If the sense of identity is created by the narrative inspired by photographic images, the sense of identity that emerges from these photographic images of memory is bound to be problematic as well: they are ossified memories that 'edit out' the effects of fascism on everyday life, and the narrator has to do extensive historical research and read the corresponding back numbers of the local newspaper in order to put them into their proper context.⁴² The research reveals that the remembered snapshots, in their idyllic innocence, are not to be trusted. Wolf, using the metaphor of remembering as digging, this time not for artefacts, but geological fossils (the metaphor springs from the claim, made by a friend of the narrator that for her, the Third Reich was as remote as the tertiary period). The fossilised memories are characterised by their 'dreadful lack of singularity' they are 'ready-made parts' created by the desire not to confront the lie of the happy childhood. Seen in this context, memory creates a systematical deception. (p. 144)⁴³ The autobiographical narrative that pulls the memories together from a position of hindsight takes away their status as 'happy memories' and explains the family history as far from individual, but as a typical example of the German people's blind acceptance of National Socialism, and their unwillingness to be aware of the imminence of war. Like

that the child understands the magnitude of her loss.

⁴² See Sabine Wilke (1993) *Ausgraben und Erinnern: Zur Funktion von Geschichte, Subjekt und Geschlecht*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, p. 44.

⁴³ Sabine Wilke compares Wolf's geological memory with Walter Benjamin's archaeological memory and argues that by placing the fragments within their political context, Wolf posits a dialectical relationship between history and memory (see *Ausgraben und Erinnern*, p. 44).

H. D., Wolf looks for the typical behind the individual, but her archetypes are not mythical, but banal and conformist. In order to reappropriate her own history, the narrator has to work through the predictable behaviour of the majority and discover her own complicity.

4. Time and Memory

For Richard Coe, the connection as well as the split between the present and the past is a vital element of the autobiography of childhood produced since the times and example of Rousseau. Because the autobiographer's identity 'is and is not continuous from child to man,'⁴⁴ memories of the childhood function as a way of access to the Other, an Otherness that is connected to the mythical, the magical, a heightened awareness of the sensuality of the world around the child as opposed to the routines of everyday life. Writing a 'Childhood' is thus a way of displaying one's poetic credentials and connecting oneself to language, play and poetry. For the autobiographer, this depiction of childhood as magical, as well as the difficulty of remembering, leads to a pursuit of 'the poet's truth rather than the historian's accuracy'⁴⁵ to which the writer of the autobiography proper is bound. However, as Coe recognises, a childhood autobiography is always an artful recreation of the child's way of seeing the world. Similarly, for Maureen Duffy, the very vividness of childhood memories she describes in her

⁴⁴ Richard Coe, *When the Grass was Taller*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

own autobiographical novel is not a proof of their authenticity, but the result of a creative process. (*That's How it Was*, p. xi)⁴⁶

I would like to connect this view of childhood autobiography with the 'super-memories' I have described before: Both the childhood itself and the memories are infused by a powerful, mythical Other that grounds and overwhelms the self at the same time. In *A Sketch of the Past*, Virginia Woolf works with a Proustian and a narrative discourse of memory at the same time. Because of the layering of present and past I have described in the previous chapter, memories must be part of the past and shaped by the present at the same time: 'In certain favourable moods, memories—what one has forgotten—come to the top.' (*A Sketch of the Past*, p. 67)⁴⁷ Memories are involuntary recollections, and they are sometimes more real than the present. Like those theorised by Benjamin, they are inscribed by a unexpected shock: 'there was a sudden violent shock;

⁴⁶ On literary writing that is reproducing/inventing the child's way of seeing the world, see Carolyn Steedman (1990) *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan 1860-1931*. London: Virago.

⁴⁷ This connection between memory and forgetting is an ongoing problem within autobiography. On the one hand, 'is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?' Walter Benjamin (1934 [1968]) 'Reflections On Proust.' In: *Illuminations*, pp. 197-210; p. 204. On the other hand, there is the suspicion that 'the things one does not remember are as important, perhaps they are more important' (*A Sketch of the Past*, p. 69) and the question that dogged Christa Wolf's narrator: why do I remember these events, and not others? or, 'why remember the hum of bees in the garden going to the beach, and forget completely being thrown naked by father into the sea?' (*A Sketch of the Past*, p. 70) Freud explained this phenomenon as the formation of a 'screen memory': possibly threatening elements are edited out, and what remains are 'childhood scenes [that] are innocent by the very reason of their incompleteness.' Sigmund Freud (1899 [1962]) 'Screen Memories.' In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey. Vol. III. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 299-322; p. 320. However, the authors of *Emotion and Gender* argue that disturbing memories may remain unspoken because no narrative framework exists

something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life.' (p. 71)

These memories are independent of the self, a physical presence lodged in the brain that could be activated with the right technology: the narrator dreams of a machine that would bypass the accident of the memory cue and make it possible to 'fit a plug into the wall, and listen in to the past' (p. 67). On the other hand, because there is a constant interaction between the memories and the self that remembers, memories change all the time, seen through new layers of experiences the narrator has acquired. Thus, paradoxically, it might seem that the memories 'were happening independently, though I am really making it happen.' (p. 67)

Woolf begins her exploration of memory with two 'first memories', thereby upsetting the notion of the uniqueness of the first memory as the single point where the self begins to emerge, and she admits to artistic license in presenting them: 'it is more convenient artistically that we were going to St. Ives, for this will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory.' (p. 64)

One memory is of sitting on her mother's lap, in a train or bus, and seeing the printed flowers on her mother's dress: 'I can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I think.' (ibid.) Seen in the context of a later remark that the mother, because of her many duties, was more a 'general presence' than a 'particular person' to the child, this seems to

for them, and they may be retrievable once they can be rendered meaningful: for instance, as with child abuse (pp. 160-166).

be a very rare moment of closeness between mother and child, on the other hand, it is the flowers on the mother's dress which the child notices, not the presence of her body. The image is one of closeness to the mother as well of the child's active discovery of the colour and shape of the printed flowers. For Linda Anderson, this scene 'suggests a simultaneous unity and separateness, ... a place where narcissistic pleasure was indissociable from the experience of the (m)other.'⁴⁸ The second first memory is one of the archetypal first memories of being in a room, surrounded by sensory impressions:

it is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed at the nursery in St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing the splash and seeing the light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here, of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. (p. 65)

These first memories have frequently been read as a return to the 'pre-oedipal', the semiotic bliss of oneness with the mother's body, and, by extension, the world, before the intrusion of the Law of the Father and patriarchal society, and before the emergence of the subject. Linda Anderson notes that, in these two memories, 'memory seems to be gesturing towards the point of its own undoing, creating a space before the subject is constituted within time and

⁴⁸ Linda B. Anderson, (1997) *Remembered Futures: Women and Autobiography in the*

within language; the paradox is, of course, that this place only exists retrospectively, nostalgically, when it can be represented.'⁴⁹ In this psychoanalytic framework, the first memory connects the self to the Other because it reaches back to a time where the self and the other were not yet divided. This might explain why the memory is not told in the first person, and it is 'it', the memory, which is the grammatical subject of the recollection. However, the self that was curiously absent from the memory is at the same time affirmed and obliterated when it is finally introduced in the narrative: 'I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy. Perhaps, this is characteristic of all childhood memories, perhaps it accounts for their strength.' (p. 67) As in *Kindheitsmuster*, self and memory can not be there at the same time; the narrator can only recount what the child sees, hears and feels, not its sense of self. Suzanne Nalbantian argues that because this memory is related 'in a Proustian fashion, perhaps specifically under the earlier writer's direct influence ... the evasion of the self is noticeable.'⁵⁰

Twentieth Century. London and New York: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 69.

⁴⁹ Linda Anderson, *Remembered Futures*, p. 70. See also Sidonie Smith (1993) *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 83-103. For Smith, the description of this ecstasy as located in the body is relevant in connection with the narrator's confession that she can feel ecstasy as long as it is not connected to her body. The child embodies this possibility that has been lost to the adult narrator because of her experiences of sexual abuse and of the commodification of the female body.

⁵⁰ Suzanne Nalbantian (1994) *Aesthetic Autobiography: From Life to Art in Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. 143.

However, I think this is a different obliteration of the self than that described in *Kindheitsmuster*, because the second memory is not a 'snapshot' memory of a singular moment in the past, but a 'super-memory' of the self overcome by ecstasy that also breaks down the boundaries between past and present self. Whereas there the past self was erased by the present self that superseded it, and only the 'outside' image remained, in this memory the inside and the outside merge, and the self is affirmed and overcome by the emotional and bodily feeling of ecstasy that remains tied to the recollection of the image: the 'I am' is evoked and suspended in the announcement that 'I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy'. This is similar to Walter Benjamin's description of such a moment where the I is overcome in the creation of a strong memory. Linda Anderson connects the memories and moments of being described in *A Sketch of the Past* to Julia Kristeva's Lacanian definition of the sublime (as an Other that overwhelms the self): 'the sublime object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory.'⁵¹

However, I think that there is also a 'narrative' model of self and memory at work in *A Sketch of the Past* where memory is not added to an illusory pre-existing, stable self, or points toward a split within the self, but instead works to create the self. Christine Battersby writes: 'what sets up the specificity of an individual—or of an individualized self—on such a model is repetition,

⁵¹ Julia Kristeva, quoted in Linda Anderson, *Remembered Futures*, p. 71.

memory, echo and time.’⁵² With the passing years those layers of memories and experiences become more and more complex, until ‘the baby, who can just distinguish a great blot of purple and blue’ turns into ‘the child who thirteen years later can feel all that I felt ... when my mother died.’ (p. 79) Woolf’s description of the relationship between memory, the self, and others fit in with Battersby’s model of a self that is created by constant interaction between self and other, or others: ‘I have left out the most important—those instincts, affections, passions, attachments ... which bound me, I suppose, from the first moment of consciousness to other people.’ (p. 80) As Sidonie Smith puts it, ‘memories are so many umbilical cords connecting the narrator to the swirl of others surrounding her.’⁵³ On the other hand, the memories convey a very strong impression of place, of ‘being there’, and of the wonderment at being alive at all. Linda Anderson argues that the “colour-and-sound” memories ... are spatial memories, essentially unlocated in time. They are associated with a place, which exists both as a real place and as a symbolic topography, where the memories “hang together.”⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin had argued that ‘autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life’ whereas, in his own *Berlin Chronicle*, he is ‘talking of a space [Berlin], of moments and discontinuities.’⁵⁵ I would like to argue that, in *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf succeeds in holding these concepts of memory (as a single image,

⁵² Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, pp. 204-5.

⁵³ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ Linda Anderson, *Remembered Futures*, p. 70.

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, p. 316.

connected to a space or place, as an element in narrative, and as a sublime force overpowering the self) together. The self in *A Sketch of the Past* is bound to locations, family, parents and society at large 'like a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place, but cannot describe the stream.' (p. 80) On the one hand, the narrator recognises 'how futile life-writing becomes' (ibid.), because one can never capture all the forces acting upon the self. On the other hand, she is not completely held in place, but is also able to move around, like a fish in a stream, creating ever new and more complex patterns of memories.

Richard Coe describes the Childhood as a poetic text which reproduces the qualities to which the adult poet/narrator wants to connect him- or herself: a fascination with language, and the 'related experiences which we have attempted to describe as those of the *alternative dimension*, of *magic*, and of *abundance*'⁵⁶ but characteristically situated in a very small world that stands in for the entire universe. In *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman describes a series of early childhood memories (though she marks none of them out as the first one). The first memory in the series is very similar to the one described as the central memory in *A Sketch of the Past*:

I am lying in bed, watching the slowly moving shadows on the ceiling made by the gently blowing curtains ... I am trying hard not to fall asleep. Being awake is so sweet that I want to delay the loss of consciousness. ... I repeat to

⁵⁶ Richard Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 285, his italics.

myself that I am in Cracow, Cracow, which to me is both home and the universe. (*Lost in Translation*, p. 5)

In this episode, Hoffman recalls the sheer ecstasy of being alive, and a sense of locatedness that is even stronger than in the other first memories I have described above. On the other hand, even more pronounced than in *A Sketch of the Past*, the past and present self of the autobiography merge in an evocation of the 'I am.' This merging of past and present self is, paradoxically, a privileged moment that is only possible in writing, or in performance.

While the childhood self Hoffman describes is thus shaped by location, it also displays a fascination with poetic language. Another memory episode describes the child discovering the magic properties of storytelling:

'Bramaramaszerymery, rotumotu pulimuli' I say in a storytelling voice, as if I were starting out a long tale ... 'What are you talking about?' my mother asks. 'Everything' I say ... I want to tell A Story, Every Story ... not anything in particular that might be said through the words I know. (p. 11)

According to Coe's reading of the Childhood, the author displays her credentials as a true poet by linking herself to the childhood self's perception of language as magical. Hoffman displays, in a nutshell, the identity of the autobiographer as storyteller who creates a world within language, a story which possibly contains 'everything'. On the other hand, this is a scene of nostalgia, too: the adult narrator mourns for the child's confidence in being able

to make up the right words to 'make a Möbius strip of language in which everything, everything is contained.' (ibid.)

For Christa Wolf's 'Nelly', it was the idea of not being born at all that ruptures the magical state of being at one with the world. For the child in Hoffman's autobiography, the parents' stories (stories of how they survived the Holocaust, and the story of her aunt who died in an extermination camp) provide the brush with Otherness. The parents seem all of a sudden extremely fragile: 'The ocean of death is so enormous, and life such a tenuous continent.' (p. 7) On the other hand, the death of her aunt is, to her, a story, more horrible than one of the Grimms' tales, and the child responds by making up a countering story: 'In my head, without telling anyone, I form the resolve that when I grow up, I'll search the world far and wide for this lost aunt. Maybe she lived and emigrated to ... New York, or Venezuela.' (p. 7)

The other rupture in the fullness of childhood is sense of time passing:

How can this be, that this fullness, this me on the street, the moment which is perfectly abundant, will be gone? It's like that time I broke a large porcelain doll and no matter how much I wished it back to wholeness, it lay on the floor in pieces. ... Remember this, I command myself, as if that way I could make some of it stay. When you're grown up, you'll remember this. And you remember how you told yourself to remember. (p. 17)

It is the 'backward tug' of death (p. 7), the sudden awareness of time passing and one's own mortality that fuels the will to remember. This seems to be fairly common, even in an uneventful childhood (I can remember several instances like this when I was a child; the first on my fourth birthday). As Carolyn Steedman puts it, 'you're nostalgic for childhood whilst it's happening to you.'⁵⁷ However, this feeling seems to signal a break with the abundant, magical world of childhood as described by Coe. The intensity of being alive is always accompanied (or perhaps created) by a sense of the void, of the possibility of not being there at all, or of the anticipation of the passage of time, or of death.

5. Conclusion

Benedict Anderson had argued that the production of identity through narrated memory is only possible in an 'homogenous, empty time'. In the memory episodes I have looked at, the homogeneity of time as well as that of the self is disrupted: memories are moments where the boundaries between past and present are blurred, either because the past memory is a dislocated fragment of the past that clashes with another dislocated moment in the present, in the 'snapshot' memory or because past and present merge in the 'super-memory.' The narrative of the self is not a simple, chronological one, but it is complex and sometimes contradictory, because the self is constructed by a coherent narrative as well as the remembered moments that disrupt and/or

⁵⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, p. 143.

transcend the narrative. The narrativisation of memory, in turn, makes it possible to link the self to others. The narrative of the self is dependent on other people's narratives. Shari Benstock, in her reading of *A Sketch of the Past*, argues that, once the autobiographer takes on board the notion of the unconscious, the "sealed vessel" of selfhood ... "cracks" and "floods" and that "writing the self" is therefore a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity'.⁵⁸ Benstock is of the opinion that *A Sketch of the Past* shows only that the 'workings of memory ... are found to be suspect. ... Every exercise in memory recall Woolf tries ... demonstrates the failure and futility of life writing.'⁵⁹ Yet, I would like to take a positive view on the provisional nature of autobiographical memory and of an autobiographical self that is at the same time created, affirmed and called into question within the autobiographies. It seems to me that the autobiographers employ a fluid model of selfhood, similar to the one that Christine Battersby develops in her book *The Phenomenal Woman*, where 'personality emerges ... via patterns of relations with otherness (established over time) On such a model, "self" grows out of "otherness", and "sameness" is gradually patterned from "difference"'. For Battersby, this model of selfhood is not to be confused with an 'ethics of care' that would 'entail a duty of empathy with those others'.⁶⁰ Likewise, for theorising women writers' autobiography, this model of selfhood is not a return to the kind of feminist theory of autobiography that (by adopting Chodorow's

⁵⁸ Shari Benstock, 'Authorizing the Autobiographical', p. 29.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

argument that women's identities are more fluid than men's) suggests that their autobiographies are less structured around the progress of the singular self than through relationships to others. The first memory episodes make clear that the point of origin is at the same time the core of the self (they show a sense of location, the discovery of the I, of language and of the ecstasy of being alive) and inescapably other: the real point of origin, the birth, is not remembered, the sense of being alive is always complemented by the realisation that they are 'lucky to be alive'. Memory, which could strengthen the sense of identity, is unreliable; early childhood memories are most often part of a collective 'family memory', part of other people's stories. Paradoxically, the more the autobiographer tries to validate a memory as 'true' and as 'one's own', the more suspect it becomes; and while the adult can remember what the child saw, or felt, she cannot remember being the child: the sense of continuous identity is troubled. The myths of origin these autobiographers develop do not show a self that is always 'the same', but one that is always changing, shaped by 'the Other'.

⁶⁰ Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p. 209.

Building a third, or hybrid, space from two or more places of origin, the autobiographer of diaspora discriminates among a plurality of possible positions, all incomplete and in continuous process, in order to recognize who speaks, who is spoken, and just who might be listening.¹

(Susanna Egan)

Chapter Seven

The Re-Writing of Home: Origins and Diaspora

1. Autobiography and Diaspora

In this chapter, I want to broaden out my exploration of autobiography as myth of origin by a reading of three autobiographers who construct a myth of origin from a situation of diaspora. I shall focus on Audre Lorde, whose parents came from the Caribbean to the US (but who refers to the broader Black diaspora as well); on Maxine Hong Kingston, whose parents emigrated from China during the Sino-Japanese war, and on Eva Hoffman, whose Jewish parents left Poland for Canada, and who refers to the experience of being uprooted from her hometown and to Jewish diaspora as well. The first difficulty one encounters is one of definition. Is the Jewish diaspora the only diaspora, or the original diaspora in comparison to which all other diasporas are defined? Is everyone who left his or her country of origin automatically living in a diaspora, or is a diaspora caused by acts of violence, like the institution of slavery or ethnic or political 'cleansing'? Does a diaspora need a specific 'homeland' against which it is defined? In her book *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah perceives a

¹ Susanna Egan (1999) *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. Chapel

tension between a concept of diaspora that stresses the 'homeland' from which the diaspora occurs and one that stresses the necessity of making one's home elsewhere:

The word derives from the Greek - *dia*, 'through', and *speirein*, 'to scatter'.

... Hence the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs. ... Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere' ... Diasporas emerge out of migrations of collectivities, whether or not members of the collectivity travel as individuals ... They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and configure.²

In this passage, Brah maps out the main tensions inherent in the concept of diaspora: the tension between the nostalgia for a 'homeland' or the country of origin and the need to make a living in the diaspora, and the tension that arises between individual and collective memories. I have already argued that the autobiographers intertwine the individual and the collective: they connect their own memories to a collective family memory, and they construct imagined communities that broaden out the highly personal myth into a possible collective of others. On the other hand, the protagonist of many autobiographies is described as rebelling against her parents' and communities' recreation of the

Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p. 121.

² Avtar Brah (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora*. London: Routledge, pp. 181, 193.

homeland. This tendency becomes especially apparent in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.

2

Diasporas are usually seen as marked out by 'their catastrophic origins, their mass nature and their disturbing effects.'³ Yet, in *Global Diasporas*, Robin Cohen challenges this notion that diasporas are necessarily traumatic, pointing out that even the original diaspora, the Jewish exile in Babylon, acquired its status as the ultimate catastrophe after the reconstitution of Israel in 514 BC and offered possibilities as well as deprivations. He then distinguishes between several types of diaspora that, together, form the diversity of modern diaspora: above all, there are victim diasporas, but there are also imperial diasporas and trade and labour diasporas.

Looking at the autobiographies discussed here, I would say that they all encompass several kinds of diaspora. For example, Lorde's ancestors were part of a 'victim diaspora' when they were sold into slavery, but her parents were part of a labour diaspora when they left the Caribbean for the USA. Moreover, although the narrator in *Zami* describes a feeling of 'homecoming' when she returns to Grenada, the pervasive traumatic experience that poisons her life and that of her mother is the experience of American racism. In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator's father emigrates in 1924, to win riches from the 'Gold

³ Robin Cohen (1997) *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press, p. 1.

Mountain', America (p. 11); her mother follows in 1939 in order to escape the Sino-Japanese war (p. 90). Their daughter suffers from racist assumptions (of Oriental women as pretty and passive 'geishas') as well from traditional Chinese misogyny. While her parents save money to return to China, she dreads returning to a place where, her parents tell her, little girls can be sold as slaves. Eva Hoffman's narrator is caught in a twofold diaspora: the Jewish diaspora in Poland and the Polish diaspora in America. While, as stated above, the death of most of her parents' family members in the Holocaust forms a traumatic break from the past, she feels at home in Cracow. Only in Vancouver and America does she begin to feel estranged, having lost her own language and being unable to decipher the unspoken social conventions.

For Cohen, the distinguishing feature of diasporic communities remains the fact that for them the 'old country always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions.'⁴ This claim is often made stronger by hostility encountered in the new place. Thus, the myth of origin is, again, complemented by the myth of return home: 'The "return" of most diasporas ... can thus be seen as a largely eschatological concept: it is used to make life more tolerable by holding out a utopia ... that stands in contrast to the perceived dystopia in which actual life is lived.'⁵ Lorde and Kingston describe both how the immigrant parents create an image of 'home' they hope to return to as a lost paradise, and how this, for the

⁴ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 1.

children, makes the present life of poverty seem more bearable and unreal, both at the same time. However, if the homeland becomes a kind of lost utopia, the drawbacks that I have outlined when discussing 'utopias' apply: the stable, harmonic community that is created out of the experience of diaspora can become oppressive.

The common thread in the work of several authors who look at diaspora from a cultural studies framework—for example, Paul Gilroy,⁶ Carole Boyce Davies⁷ and Avtar Brah⁸—is that they conceptualise a 'diaspora space', where the movement between the place of origin and the diaspora is not a movement backwards, from an impure present to pure origins, but across space, a journey between these two (and possibly other) places.⁹ The concept of 'diaspora space' makes it possible to trace the multiple connections and cross-influences between the many places of 'home' and 'diaspora'. For example, in *The Black Atlantic* Paul Gilroy describes a counterproductive Pan-African stance that 'puts Africa, authenticity, and origin in crude opposition to the Americas, hybridity, creolisation and rootlessness' and ignores the multiple links between Black

⁵ William Safran (1991) 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return.' In *Diaspora* 1, pp. 83-99; p. 94.

⁶ Paul Gilroy (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.

⁷ Carol Boyce Davies (1994) *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, London and New York: Routledge.

⁸ See Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*.

⁹ Elizabeth De Loughrey argues that the stress on 'travelling' versus 'dwelling' silences women's experience of diaspora and reinforces the male right to travel and theorise. Elizabeth De Loughrey (1998) 'Gendering the Oceanic Voyage.' In *Thamyris* 5: 2, pp. 205-31.

cultures in Africa and the diaspora.¹⁰ Carole Boyce Davies argues that 'gender, migration and racial oppression create a sense of unified culture as they create difference.'¹¹ Against this sense of unified culture, it becomes necessary to assert the 'multiple articulations of class, race, gender, sexuality and other categories and identities.'¹² Similarly, the Hong Kong feminist Rey Chow warns against the 'lures of diaspora' that make authentic 'Chineseness' at once desirable and unattainable, thus functioning like the Chinese communist party: 'sacrifice everything, including your life, to the party, but it remains the party's decision whether or not you are loyal.'¹³

In these theories, diaspora is seen in connection with identity: unified cultural identities are exchanged for dispersed and hybrid cultures and multiple identities. This clashes with a framework of a social history that is more concerned with the sociopolitical circumstances of clearly defined groups of immigrants, migrant workers or refugees.¹⁴ One of the many possible definitions of a diaspora is 'a culture without a country.'¹⁵ Diaspora then becomes an explanatory paradigm that can be used independently of the strictly historical definition. Thus, it can become useful for breaking up totalising

¹⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 199.

¹¹ Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, p. 20.

¹² Ibid., p. 20.

¹³ Rey Chow (1993) *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 25.

¹⁴ Avtar Brah has been criticised for not distinguishing between refugees, former colonials and exiles; see Diana Leonard (1997) 'Extended Review.' In: *British Journal of the Sociology of Education* 18: 4, pp. 597-600.

narratives of nationality, origins, or linear progress. The project is 'to stake out a ... borderzone between identity-as-essence and identity-as-conjuncture,'¹⁶ to theorise 'migratory subjectivities' (Davies) or 'contested identities' (Brah) that are shaped by multiple journeys between and influences from both the place of origin and within the diaspora. These 'migratory' or 'multiple' subjectivities are on the one hand shaped by very distinct historical and/or geographical conditions and the 'intersecting axes of domination,'¹⁷ but on the other hand, they are always open to contestation and negotiation, and to re-inventing oneself. They also offer the possibility of forging an alliance with a feminist politics of location that, in Carole Boyce Davies' words,

is about positionality in geographic, historical, social, economic, educational terms. It [a feminist politics of location] is about positionality in society based on class, gender, sexuality, age, income. It is also about relationality and the ways in which one is able to access, mediate or reposition oneself.¹⁸

Moreover, the concept of 'diaspora space' is a framework that encompasses the autobiographical selves created by Kingston, Lorde, and Hoffman: they are diasporic and precisely, multiply located at the same time. All three are engaged with the 're-writing of home' that Carole Boyce Davies had described as a

¹⁵ Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton (1998) *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 5.

¹⁶ Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, eds. (1996) *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity*, Durham/ North Carolina: Duke University Press, p. 13.

¹⁷ Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani (1996) 'Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, "Postcoloniality", and the Politics of Location.' In Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, eds. *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity*, pp. 273-93; p. 288.

¹⁸ Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, p. 153.

reaction to a situation of diaspora: 'Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn prompts the rewriting of home.'¹⁹

However, the situation of women autobiographers is further complicated by the special connections drawn between women and origins. In a fundamentalist, 'communalist' world view, it is duty of the women to uphold the purity of the community: to pass on the traditions and safeguard its genetic purity by remaining chaste, or faithful; to recreate a home to which men can return after having been exposed to the hostile, contaminating outside.²⁰ However, as I will show in more detail further on, Audre Lorde and Maxine Hong Kingston describe in their autobiographies how the narrators' mothers simultaneously conform to and resist this pattern, imposing restrictive traditions on their daughters and acting as strong role models at the same time. As daughters of immigrant families, they have to negotiate two concepts of femininity: that of the culture of origin and that of America. I have already described how they, on the one hand, act as a double bind, but, on the other hand, enable them to invent their own images of self.²¹ Moreover, as Carole Boyce Davies argues, 'home' as a conflation of 'home country' and 'family' can have a different meaning for men and women:

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 113.

²⁰ See Irene Gedalof (1999) *Against Purity: Rethinking Identity with Indian and Western Feminisms*. London and New York: Routledge.

²¹ Avtar Brah argues that 'the reconfiguration of these social [gender] relations will not be a matter of direct superimposition of patriarchal forms deriving from the country of emigration over those that obtain in the country to which migration has occurred. Rather, both will

Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in autobiographical writing. The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women. The mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways.²²

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's argument that, while some of the experiences of first and second generation immigrants might be comparable, there are important differences between 'immigrant autobiographies' and 'autobiographies of Americanisation':

The American-born do not have direct memories of the Old World; their understanding of the Old World culture is necessarily mediated by their parents, who themselves undergo inevitable transformations ... Moreover, immigrants and their children frequently do experience their family conflicts *in the form of* cultural confrontation; ... The 'culture of memory' of the foreign-born is not the 'culture of memory' of the American-born.²³

I accept that these are important differences between first or second generation immigrant autobiographies. However, the distinction between immigrant autobiographies and autobiographies of Americanisation does not address the connections adult daughters of immigrants make between themselves and their

undergo transformations as they articulate in and through specific policies, institutions and modes of signification.' (*Cartographies of Diaspora*, p. 194)

²² Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, p. 21.

²³ Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1998) 'Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach.' In: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison (University of Wisconsin Press), pp. 299-135; pp. 301-2, her italics.

parents' place of origin. These are connections which are not mediated by their parents, sometimes even made in spite of their parents' values and beliefs (I think especially of Audre Lorde's reclaiming of a Carriacou counter-tradition of love between women that clashes with her parent's Catholic values). Moreover, the assumption of first generation immigrants' direct memories and thus immediate access to their culture of origin is doubtful in the light of claims that this monolithic culture of origin is precisely produced by the situation of diaspora.

In the following, I will trace the ways in which Lorde, Kingston and Hoffman re-write home from a situation of diaspora, and the ways in which their autobiographical selves are seen to be shaped by diaspora. I will begin by introducing the concept of 'matrilineal diaspora' and describe the ways in which Lorde and Kingston connect themselves to their mothers, and female ancestors situated within the culture of origin. Then, I will explore the protagonists' relationship to the language and cultural traditions used by their parents (again, the mother will be crucial for this) and the ways in which they attempt to draw on counter-traditions that do not marginalise women.

2. A 'Matrilineal Diaspora'

In the previous chapter on Utopias, I have written about the 're-writing of home' in *Zami*, and about how 'home', for the narrator, is a paradise island that is already lost, a place of nostalgia for the narrator's mother as well as for the

narrator herself. Here, I would like to broaden out this idea of the re-writing of home by introducing Chinosole's concept of 'matrilineal diaspora'.

The Black feminist critic Chinosole uses *Zami* in order to explain her concept of matrilineal diaspora: a paradoxical term that stresses the connections between women, while at the same time acknowledging the many cultures of the Black diaspora. In her own words:

Matrilineal diaspora: the capacity to survive and aspire, to be contrary and self-affirming across continents and generations. ... Matrilineal diaspora defines the links among Black women worldwide enabling us to experience distinct but related cultures while retaining a special sense of home as the locus of self-definition and power.²⁴

According to Chinosole, Lorde connects the motifs of the slave narrative (the dispersal from home, and the need for adaptation and survival) to a 'mythical and legendary connection to African women, the legendary and historical connection to the women in the Caribbean, and her autobiographical connection to her mother.' West African myths (the goddesses Mawulisa and Afrekete, the Amazons of Dahomey) become connected to her Caribbean ancestors and later friends and lovers: '*Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and*

²⁴ Chinosole (1990) 'Audre Lorde and Matrilineal Diaspora.' In: Joanne M. Braxton and Andrea Nicola Mc Laughlin, eds. *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Aframerican Culture and the Contemporary Renaissance*. London: Serpent's Tail, pp. 379-94; p. 379

Afrekete, her youngest daughter ... whom we must all become.' (Zami, p. 223, her italics) Thus, myth is 'the major fictional frame connecting Ma-Mariah of Carriacou and Afrekete/Kitty of Africa and Harlem.'²⁵ It is both Linda, the narrator's mother, and Kitty/Afrekete, her lover, who connect her back to her origins: Linda to the Black diaspora in the Caribbean, and Afrekete to the mythical homeland in West Africa. However, this connection is not shared with her father (who does not want to be reminded of home because he forces himself to look forward to a future in America) nor by a community of immigrants: the narrator's parents feel the need to maintain their illusion of security and self-image of respectability by not socialising with the 'vulgar' Harlem neighbours whose ancestors were slaves in America. While the dream of returning home prevents her mother from acquiring the skills to survive in America, she seems to be entirely cut off from her origins, the knowledge from Carriacou useless in Harlem:

My parents' dream of going home receded into the background. Little secret sparks of it were kept alive for years by my mother's search for tropical fruits 'under the bridge.' ... Trapped. There was so little that she really knew about the strangers' country. How the electricity worked. The nearest church.

Where the Free Milk Fund for Babies handouts occurred. ... She knew how to prevent infection in an open cut or wound by heating the black-elm leaf over a wood-fire until it wilted in the hand, rubbing the juice into the cut. ...

But there was no black-elm in Harlem, no black oak leaves to be had in New

²⁵ Ibid., p. 388.

York City. Ma-Mariah, her root-woman grandmother, had taught her well ...
But there was no call for this knowledge now. (*Zami*, pp. 3-4)

In *Zami*, it is the daughter who²⁶ insists on cooking Caribbean food and using the traditional mortar and pestle, while the mother 'looked upon the advent of powdered everything as a cook's boon.' Her mother's mortar, brought from the Caribbean, is intricately carved: 'there were rounded plums and oval indeterminate fruit, some long and fluted like a banana, others ovular and end-swollen like a ripe alligator pear' and 'an elaborated affair, quite at variance ... with her projected public view of herself.' (p.57) The mortar is an image for a tradition of sensuality both phallicly masculine and roundedly feminine that her mother imparts on her in spite of herself.²⁶ Likewise, as I have argued in Chapter Three, the narrator connects her lesbianism to her mother, and her Carriacou heritage. According to Chinosole, this connection is not only personal, but fulfils a political function as well: 'By tracing her lesbian identity to her family origin and history Lorde has cleared an important path in Aframerican literature: freeing the idea of lesbianism from the closet of "white decadence"'.²⁷ In describing the lovemaking between the narrator and Kitty/Afrekete, Lorde expands this 'naturalisation' of lesbianism by connecting it to nature and African/Caribbean heritages, echoing the fruit carved on the

²⁶ In the Prologue to *Zami*, the narrator celebrates her body as '*both man and woman ... sliding and folded and tender and deep ... the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way.*' (*Zami*, p. xvi, her italics).

²⁷ Chinosole, 'Audre Lorde and Matrilineal Diaspora', pp. 385-6. See also Erin Carlston (1993) 'Zami and the Politics of Plural Identity.' In: Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope (eds.), *Sexual*

mortar: *'ripe red finger bananas ... with which I parted your lips gently'* (p. 218) and mashed avocado that forms *'a mantle of goddess pear that I slowly licked from your skin.'* (p. 220)

Afrekete/Kitty ('the Black pussycat') is the West African goddess or African dream woman, the incarnation of the narrator's desire to return to a mythical Africa: *'Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me ... She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava.'* (p. 218)²⁸

At the same time, she is the New York lesbian, who is precisely located in history: she comes from Georgia (that is, her ancestors were slaves in the American South); the way she dresses (bermuda shorts, zipped jacket, black belt) is described as an attempt to occupy a space in-between the butch and femme dress codes of the Fifties; her hair is straightened (thus conforming to American standards of feminine beauty) but short. The image where these two narratives come together (and point back to the narrator's mother) is the magical fruit which Kitty bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue ... *'I got this under the bridge'* was a saying from time immemorial, giving an adequate explanation that whatever it was had come from as far back and as close to home—that is to say, was as authentic—as possible. (p. 218)

Practice, Textual Theory. Lesbian Cultural Criticism, Cambridge/Massachusetts: Blackwell, pp. 226-36.

The metaphor implies that a direct connection to African/Caribbean origins cannot be made, that one has to settle for ‘as authentic as possible’ which can become ‘magical’ nevertheless. Afrekete is not a mother-goddess, but decidedly the ‘*youngest daughter*’ (p. 223) implying that while mothers are included in the ancestral heritage of *zami*,²⁹ it is the daughters who can become openly, sexually lesbian. Lorde integrates many Black cultures and diasporas (West African myth, Caribbean island culture, Harlem immigrants, Southern descendants of slaves, New York Black lesbian subculture) without subjecting them to a totalising narrative that makes some more valid than others. All these strands of narrative are held together by loving connections between women, thus creating, as Chinosole had claimed, a ‘matrilineal diaspora’.

3. Keeping the Traditions: The Chinese Heritage in *The Woman Warrior*

Let us return to the story of No Name Woman: Trying to flesh out the bare bones of this story and to make sense of it, the narrator does not only endeavour to recreate and connect herself to her ostracised, dead aunt (as I have described above) but she recreates the Chinese village as a circle that is continuously under threat and must not be broken:

²⁸ Perhaps it is worth noting that the dream woman does not grow exotic fruit, but cocoyams and cassava, the staple root vegetables that sustain everyday living: the connection to West African myth is, for the narrator, not a luxury but a necessity.

²⁹ ‘There have always been Black dykes around—in the sense of powerful and woman-oriented women—who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma.’ (*Zami*, p. 6)

The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the 'roundness'. ... The round moon cakes and round doorways, ... round windows and rice bowls—these talismans had lost their powers to warn this family of the law: a family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead, who in turn looked after the family. (pp.19-20)

However, Kingston makes it clear that this perfect roundness has already been broken up: war and bad harvests have forced the men to go abroad, looking for work in order to send money home. 'They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection.' (p. 15) It is down to the women to maintain the threatened integrity of the village and the family bloodline, whereas the anger about the loss of integrity and poverty becomes directed at the woman who was 'acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them.' (p. 19) The narrator's mother intends this story to be a cautionary tale, ending it with 'the villagers are watchful', (p. 13) stressing that 'the village' is a system that has become transposed from China to America. The emigrants have re-created 'their' village in the diaspora: 'Living among one's own emigrant villagers can give a good Chinese far from China glory and a place. "That old busboy is really a swordsman", we whisper as he goes by. ... "He has a tong axe in his closet."' (p. 53)

However, Kingston's narrative seems to counter the claim that the diasporic community protects their threatened culture by controlling women: the villagers' control works in the Chinese village (or so the narrator's mother makes her believe), but not in America. In the village, the men are able to travel and change to become 'western men', while women are forced to keep up the illusion of an intact village and an intact tradition. While this tradition is unbroken in the mother's narrative, the world her daughter experiences is totally different. She becomes caught up between the two worlds: 'those of us in the first American generation have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fit in solid America.' (p. 13)

Though it is the task of the women to pass on the traditions in the diaspora, the narrator's mother refuses to pass on Chinese traditions to her children (because they are half-American and therefore not to be trusted): 'You get no warning that you shouldn't wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chopsticks or drum them.' (p. 166) Paradoxically, though, this frees her to re-invent China as a magical place, where ghosts live and women can become shamans and swordswomen. However, as Lee Quinby argues, Kingston uses 'each tradition [Chinese and American] to intervene against the

other'.³⁰ From the American tradition, she takes the idea of individual freedom (and thus women's liberation). At the same time, she cherishes the Chinese tradition of storytelling and criticises the relentless work ethic and deadening rationality in the US. Seen from the perspective of 'women's liberation', China is also a frightening place of misogyny, where baby girls are killed and older girls sold into slavery, because they are mere chattels to their family: 'Her husband's parents could have mortgaged her, stoned her, sold her.' (p. 15)³¹ Because the emigrants have recreated their village in exile, the traditions of misogyny linger on. The narrator recalls the scorn of the other Chinese immigrants for their parents for having only 'one girl—and another girl' and the often-quoted proverbs ('Girls are maggots in the rice'; 'It is more profitable to raise geese than girls'.) She responds, as a small child, by thrashing around and crying: "I'm not a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl." I might as well have said, "I'm not a girl.'" (p. 48) When her little brother is finally born, the girl realises that the superiority of boys is enshrined in Chinese tradition: 'Did you roll an egg on my face when *I* was born? Did you have a full-month party for *me*? Did you turn on all the lights? ... Why not? Because I'm a girl?' (p. 48) In spite of the atrocities done to relatives who remained in China, the radical break from

³⁰ Lee Quinby (1992) 'The Subject of Memoirs.' In: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 125-45, p. 132.

³¹ For a discussion of the status of female 'slaves' in turn-of-the-century China, see Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, eds. (1994) *Women in Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape*. London and New Jersey: Zed.

traditions initiated by the Chinese communists represents, for the narrator, a new chance for women and girls:

Nobody told us that he [Mao] was freeing women from prisons, where they had been put for refusing the businessmen their parents had picked as husbands. Nobody told us that the Revolution ... was against girl slavery and girl infanticide. ... May the Communists light up the house on a girl's birthday. (p. 171)

In a culture that prefers sons, the daughters doubt their own self-worth, in cultural as well as material terms. When the protagonist's mother tells her about a slave girl she had in China, the daughter asks:

'How much money did you pay to buy her?'

'One hundred and eighty dollars.'

'How much money did you pay the doctor and the hospital when I was born?'

'Two hundred dollars.'

'Oh.'

'That's two hundred dollars American money.'

'Was the hundred and eighty dollars American money?'

'No.'

'How much was it American money?'

'Fifty dollars. That's because she was sixteen years old. Eight-year-olds were about twenty dollars. Five-year-olds were ten dollars and up. ... Babies were

free. ... And here I was in the United States paying two hundred dollars for you.’ (p. 79)

Kingston describes how worth is allocated, in Chinese tradition, by the food one is given. Traditional male heroes, Kingston points out, are ‘big eaters’, whereas women are what is eaten: ‘Chou Yi-Han of Changchow ... fried a ghost. It was a meaty stick when he cut up and cooked it. But before that it had been a woman out at night.’ (p. 84) However, while, for Audre Lorde, Caribbean foods stand for a sensuous plenty, in Kingston’s book the food her mother cooks is awful. This is because of the traditional economy of cooking everything to be found:

‘My mother has cooked for us: racoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails ... catfish that swum in the bathtub. ... We’d have to face four- and five-day-old leftovers until we ate it all. The squid eye would keep reappearing at breakfast and dinner until eaten. ...

‘Have you eaten yet?’ the Chinese greet one another. ‘Yes, I have’, they answer, whether they have or not. ‘And you?’

I would live on plastic. (*The Woman Warrior*, pp. 85-87)

The narrator in *The Woman Warrior* fights this traditional misogyny in two ways: by becoming successful in the American way and thus ‘worthy of eating the food’ (p. 53) and by resisting the stereotype of the selfless woman who cooks for others: ‘I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot.’ (p. 49) However, this self-reliance makes her more dependent on exploitative employers: ‘It’s not just the stupid racists I have to do

something about, but the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work. My job is my one and only land.' (p. 50)

Because the tradition of misogyny is carried on in the diaspora, Kingston cannot reclaim her ancestry in the same way as Lorde does, by evoking strong foremothers and reinventing a mythically perfect place of home. However, she seeks to forge connections by rewriting and refashioning myths and stories (especially that of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan) turning them into a source of strength: 'The myths I write are new, American. ... I take the power I need from whatever myth. Thus, Fa Mu Lan has the words cut into her back; in traditional story, it is the man, Ngak Fei the Patriot ... I meant to take his power for women.'³² While reclaiming her origins, Kingston does not fashion a unitary self, a mythical past or a teleological narrative. As a self defined by her position in between China and America, Kingston's narrator remains always fragmented and always shaped by contradictory cultures, both resisting and using Chinese and American stories, heroes, and traditions. Retaining the position in the middle, wandering and mediating between the imaginary China and concrete America, she can at the same time reject and reshape the myths that formed her childhood.

³² Maxine Hong Kingston (1991) 'Personal Statement', in Shirley Geok-lim Lin (ed.) *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's 'The Woman Warrior'*. New York: MLA, pp. 23-25, p. 24.

4. A Lost Paradise: *Lost in Translation*

In *Lost in Translation*, exile and diaspora also figure prominently, though differently from Lorde's and Kingston's autobiographies. Firstly, because Hoffman emigrated, along with her parents, when she was a teenager, she describes being torn between the old and the new country, haunted by the possibility of what she could have been if she had stayed in Krakow. I have already remarked on Hoffman's use of nostalgia, especially for one's childhood, as the emotion that forms the core of the self, but it can lead to being caught in the past, frozen in the longing for what has been lost. Thus, the use of childhood and home as guarantors of a seamless identity is disrupted, and thereby, implicitly, any autobiographical narrative that depends on these categories.

Hoffman, who does not create an ancestral myth, nevertheless lovingly recreates the Cracow that is now forever lost, and recounts the intense sensory and emotional experiences of childhood. However, she also describes living in a diaspora even during her idealised childhood, as the daughter of Jewish parents who survived the German occupation in hiding. Her parents, though not religious, nevertheless go to the synagogue once a year and celebrate Passover in order to honour the dead. For the daughter, this means that Jewishness is at once very familiar and completely Other, something that does and does not define her identity at the same time. On the one hand, 'the sense of being Jewish permeates our apartment like the heavy sweet dough ... for making hallah. The Jewishness lives in that bread ... it's one of the markers of our

difference.’ (p. 29) On the other hand, the child perceives Jewish rituals as something utterly Other: ‘the High Holidays ... [are] a disruption of everything ordinary, a small journey into hermetic Otherness.’ (p. 36) Her parents, praying and chanting in Hebrew, become inaccessible to their daughter. Even more Other than the service at the synagogue are the Hassidim, ‘a circle of men, dressed in long, black coats, moving round and round in a drunken, ecstatic dance’ whom the child watches in wonderment (p. 38). As in *The Woman Warrior*, the parents are still part of a tradition they do not fully impart on the child, and thus Jewishness becomes something that is as all-pervasive as the smell of bread dough and on the other hand something completely strange and unintelligible. The girl attempts to cope with this situation not by denying her ancestry, but by retaining a political sense of Jewishness while immersing herself in Polish life, and socialising with Jewish and non-Jewish friends and school mates. Though she tries to distance herself from the traumatic aspects of Jewish diaspora, pogroms and the Holocaust as things that happened in the distant past, ‘during the war’ (p. 35), she comes to acknowledge that ‘this—the pain of this—is where I come from, and that it’s useless to try to get away’ (p. 25)

Another part of her experience of diaspora is the move to Canada and America, where she feels more like a part of the Polish diaspora in America, missing the Polish zest for life and indulgence that can be wrested from the most dismal surroundings. On the other hand, she historicises this experience by locating her

parents' move as happening in between waves of emigration, without a support system to help the newcomers. (p. 125) She perceives the Jews that have 'made it' as trapped, attempting to imitate Canadian culture but never really fitting in, while giving up their own culture and systems of neighbourly help and gossip. The main sufferers are the women, imprisoned in suburban houses with sometimes violent husbands: 'they live too far apart from each other to maintain an unashamed ease of daily intercourse, and without being incorporated in a different system of social rules, they do not get the benefit of the local code of civility.' (p. 142) However, the most damaging aspect of diaspora is, for Hoffman, the loss of the mother tongue after the move to Canada. I have already pointed out that this loss of language results in a kind of personality split, where the narrator holds imaginary dialogues with her Polish-speaking self, the self she would have been had she not gone away. The only way to overcome this split is to reclaim the story of her origins, in the foreign language. For the narrator in *Lost in Translation*, it is the experience of psychoanalysis that makes it possible to create the voice of the storyteller:

For me, therapy is partly translation therapy, the talking cure a second language-cure. ... It's only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward, in one language, that ... the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begin to emerge. (*Lost in Translation*, p. 272)

Eva Hoffman touches on similar issues to the other two autobiographers: the split between homeland and present situation, the clash between cultures, and

being caught between contradictory codes of femininity. However, because her parents lost most of their relatives in the war or the Holocaust, and are thus cut off from the past, she does not form a celebratory myth of origin. For her, reclaiming the origins means retelling her own story to herself and connecting the Polish origins to the present life in America, thereby rebuilding a coherent sense of self, even though this storyteller self has to negotiate a multiplicity of conflicting stories.

5. The Root of My Mother's Powers: Mothers and the Place of Origin

In both Lorde's and Kingston's autobiographies, the mother is tied very closely to the place of origin. This is, on the one hand, because they want to reclaim a tradition that is matrilineal; on the other hand, it is the mother who tells the stories about 'home' and passes on the traditions. Both mothers both comply with and resist these traditions: for example, the mother in *Zami* refuses time-consuming Caribbean cooking, and the mother in *The Woman Warrior* observes traditional rituals herself, but does not pass them on to her children: 'Mother would pour Seagram's 7 into the cups and, after a while, pour it back into the bottle. Never explaining. ... The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask.' (p. 166) Moreover, while immigrant men can more easily integrate themselves in work and attempting to make a life for themselves, it is the women who have more to lose: in *The Woman Warrior*, the mother loses her status as a shaman and midwife; in *Zami*, the mother loses the network of

women relatives and friends she had relied on, and is subsequently forced into isolation.

However, both mothers are perceived by their children as forceful and all-powerful: Kingston's mother can 'carry a hundred pounds of Texas rice up- and downstairs. She could work at the laundry from six a. m. until midnight.' (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 96) Lorde's mother 'was a very powerful woman ... when the word-combination *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressable in the american common tongue.' (*Zami*, p. 6) The revelation that she is not all-powerful comes as a shock. Lorde describes this as a traumatic early memory:

... when I was three, [I] sat on the step of her dental chair at the City Dental Clinic on 23rd Street, while a student dentist pulled all the teeth on one side of her upper jaw. ... Afterwards, my mother sat outside on a long wooden bench. I saw her lean her head against the back; her eyes closed. She did not respond to my pats and tugs at her coat. Climbing up upon the seat, I peered into my mother's face ... From under her closed eyelids, drops of tears were squeezing out and running down her cheek towards her ear. ... The world was turning over. My mother was crying. (*Zami*, p. 10)

In this episode, the mother is overcome by pain; but this pain is caused by the fact that she is poor; she has to use the cheap dental clinic with student dentists and insufficient anaesthesia. In Kingston's narrative the decisive episode happens when the daughter is much older. She realises that her mother is dependent on her children for support and family ties:

When you're all home, all six of you with your children and husbands and wives, there are twenty or thirty people in this house. Then I'm happy. ...

That's the way a house should be.' ... She prises open my head and fists and crams into them responsibility for ... intervening oceans. The gods pay her and my father back for leaving their parents. My grandmother wrote letters pleading for them to come home, and they ignored her. Now they know how she felt. (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 100)

In both episodes, the mother is both powerful (she bears the pain without complaint; she is still able to 'prise open' her daughter's head) and powerless, because of poverty and isolation from her family network. It is only when the narrator in *Zami* goes back to Grenada that she can see 'the root of her mother's powers walking thorough the streets.' (p. 1) On the other hand, the mother's power is sometimes bound up with her complicity in patriarchal systems:

Lorde's mother enforces a Catholic morality that taboos bodily parts and functions, so that her daughter does not dare to tell her she has been molested by a classmate who 'threatened to break my glasses if I didn't let him stick his "thing" between my legs. ... sex had something to do with that thin pencil-like "thing" and was in general nasty and not to be talked about by nice people.' (p. 60) Kingston's narrator suspects that part of her mother's function as a midwife was to make sure girl children died, although the mother herself denies it:

I hope ... that my mother did not prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a girl. 'The midwife would take the back of a girl baby's head in her hand and turn her face into the ashes,' said my mother. 'It was very

easy.' She never said she herself killed babies (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 82)

Since the mother's power is much reduced because of losing the old social networks in a hostile new environment, it is mainly turned towards the family. Moreover, one way for her of claiming back power is the symbolic power of naming. Kingston's mother is 'good at naming' (p. 64) and to use this power to put racist Americans in their place: "Noisy Red-Mouth Ghost", she'd write on its package, naming it, marking its clothes with its name.' (p. 98) Moreover, both mothers both encourage and inhibit talking in their daughters. Audre Lorde's mother determines the official use of words in her family: 'My mother ... would just make up another word, and that word would enter our family language forever, and woe betide any of us who forgot it. ... My mother would expect me to know things, whether or not she spoke them.'³³ The mother's power over language results in the daughter's refusing to speak until she is four, out of 'self-preservation'. (p. 14) In *The Woman Warrior*, the mother's power over her daughter's speech is made clear in the act of cutting the frenum of the daughter's tongue:

... the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue.

'Why did you do that to me?' ... 'I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. ... You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another.' ... If my mother was not lying, she should have cut more, ...

³³ Claudia Tate, 'Interview with Audre Lorde', p. 83.

because I have a terrible time talking. Or she should not have cut at all, tampering with my speech. (p. 148)³⁴

For Consuelo Fuentes, one of the hardest things for the daughters of diaspora is to understand that 'her mother never had a free voice or self, as she had imagined. Her mother's voice had been "colonised", it had never been her own.'³⁵ However, for the narrators in both Lorde's and Kingston's autobiographies, their mother's powers are bound up with the place of origin. Thus, by rewriting and reclaiming the place of origin, they can also invest the mother with magical power: 'She had gone away [to midwifery school] ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magicians who came down from the mountains.' (*The Woman Warrior*, p. 73-4) On the other hand, although the daughters claim that their love of language was instilled by their mothers, they have to transgress against taboos what can or can not be said, and remake their mothers origins in their own language.

6. Conclusion: Homing Desire

The three autobiographies I have discussed are linked by the common experience of the 'strangeness' of the culture of origin, their inability to understand the world their parents are still steeped in. For Lorde and Kingston,

³⁴ In *Zami*, it is a doctor who cuts the frenum of the girl's tongue, 'so I was no longer tongue-tied' (p. 14), but she does not speak because 'I had nothing to say that would be allowed to say without punishment. Self-preservation starts very early in West Indian families.' (p. 12)

³⁵ Consuelo Rivera Fuentes (1997) 'Two Stories, Three Lovers, and the Creation of Meaning in a Black Lesbian Autobiography.' In: Heidi Safia Mirza, ed. *Black British Feminism*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 216-26; p. 220

this Otherness is problematic as well as creative, in that it frees their imagination to invest the homeland with the magical. In Hoffman's autobiography, the ties with the past are cut because most of her parents' families died in the Holocaust; and accepting the Jewish heritage of pride and suffering is described as extremely painful. For the narrator of *Lost in Translation*, the magical past that is reinvented is that of childhood which forms, stored in memory, the core of the self and the source of the deepest emotions. The strongest connection to the culture of origin is, in all three texts, the narrator's mother. Because the mother is in charge of the everyday life, the bringing up of children, the cooking and storytelling, it is the mother who preserves the Caribbean words, the Chinese stories and ballads, the Jewish way of making bread. However, it is also the mother who perpetuates patriarchal traditions and warns against sexual curiosity: for them, the connection back to the maternal heritage can be made only after they have left home and transgressed the boundaries proscribed by the mother.³⁶ Another common thread is the situation of being split between two languages; this is most traumatic for Hoffman, who has to learn a completely new language and acquire an ear for its subtle meanings. While for her, the trajectory moves towards life 'in a new language'; Lorde reclaims and remakes the Caribbean words of 'friending', 'madivine' and 'zami'; and Kingston preserves the rich, ideographic

³⁶ As Tess Coslett asks herself: 'I wonder if it's easier to see a matrilineage from another culture (however patriarchal) as offering positive alternatives to the dominant white, Western patriarchal culture, as well or instead of reinforcing its values.' Tess Coslett (2000)

character of Chinese language and script in the Chinese stories she reworks in *The Woman Warrior*. For all three autobiographers, 'home', the magical place of origin, can never be fully recovered, but it has to be reclaimed and rewritten. The situation of diaspora, while creating the desire for home, also frees them both to reclaim a counter-tradition, to choose which elements they want to claim, and which ones to disregard, and to forge an identity from Chinese/Caribbean/African/Polish and American elements, making it clear that subjectivity is always shaped by multiple discourses and locations. They display what Avtar Brah calls a 'homing desire ... [where] diaspora refers to multi-locationality within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries.'³⁷ The autobiographies written by Lorde, Kingston and Hoffman take the view that, although there is a definite sense of 'this is where I come from'; there can be never one place of origin, one fixed home, but there is an abundance of different locations, heritages and stories.

'Matrilineal Narratives Revisited.' In: Tess Cosslett et al., eds. *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 141-53.

³⁷ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p. 197.

Chapter Eight

The Whole Story: Conclusion

To conclude with, I would like to pull together four of the strands that have been important throughout the thesis: first, the theme of myth as a force of connection; second, as a special case, the use of myth to connect the autobiographer to her mother; third, the ways in which origin myths and stories affect the sense of time and the time structures used within the autobiographies; and fourth, the relationship between self and Other created by the myth of origin, where the origin is at the same time the core of the self and utterly Other.

Throughout the thesis, I have argued that myth is a strong force of connection: between the autobiographical self and her childhood, her mother, her maternal heritage and a wider community. This is because myth is characterised by the double focus of the ‘macromyth’ and the ‘micromyth’: One is connected to the universal, the general, eternal truths and patterns that happen again and again; whereas the other is connected to the particular, the local context, the particular version and personal story. Through myth, this particular story can again be connected to the universal. This quality of myth is especially useful for women writers: they can gain access to the universal truths that are denied them by patriarchal tradition; they can even claim that the universal is, as the pre-historic ‘ancient myth’, rooted in a matriarchal tradition.

One way to make this connection is through Freudian psychoanalysis: in this framework, universal myth is connected to the personal story in two ways. On the one hand, myths are universally true because they reflect the eternal laws of psychological development (the Oedipus myth is true because every male has been Oedipus at one time in his development). On the other hand, because the development of the individual mirrors the development of humankind, '*the childhood of the individual is the childhood of the race*'; or, the other way round, '*the childhood of the race is the childhood of the individual*'. (Tribute to Freud, p. 12, her italics) H. D. uses this connection as passepartout key to both her own childhood and classical myth: the ancient world becomes accessible by looking at her own childhood, on the other hand, remembered scenes from her childhood can be seen as unconscious re-enactments of myths. However, she refers both to classical, Greek or Egyptian myth and an imaginary matriarchal tradition that mirrors the pre-oedipal phase of closeness between mother and daughter, thus contesting the universality of classical myth. Moreover, if the present self can be traced back to its origins in childhood, and the origins in childhood recapture the origins of humankind, this implies that the individual has to build her own myth of origin and thereby connect herself to universal symbols and constellations.

On the other hand, myth can be used to go back even further, to break down the boundaries between the self and other people and integrate one's own story with the stories of others, especially with shared family narratives. As Adriana Cavarero had argued, the whole story of a life is only possible if the

autobiographer allows herself to be narrated by others. On the other hand, autobiography itself is driven by this desire for ‘the whole story’.¹ Within the framework of myth, or *biomythography*, it becomes possible to draw on a family story, or create a whole maternal heritage that sustains the narrator.

Myth is also used as a force of connection by autobiographers who write from a situation of diaspora to connect themselves to their place or culture of origin. This can be done by creating a maternal heritage that reaches back to the place of origin. Moreover, Audre Lorde and Maxine Hong Kingston use myths from their place of origin in order to forge this connection, but they both put a spin on tradition: Kingston’s swordswoman Fa Mu Lan fights traditional Chinese misogyny; and Audre Lorde uses the West African goddess Afrekete to express a connection between lesbian sexuality and Black spirituality.

The other connection myth makes possible is between the autobiographical self and an (imagined) community. This can take the shape of a tradition the autobiographer shares with others; but more often the community is an imagined one that stems from the autobiographer’s sense of isolation: Maureen Duffy’s ‘Paddy’ imagines being part of a big family like her mother’s, and Audre Lorde offers the myth of ‘matrilineal diaspora’ to other Black lesbians who are in a similarly isolated situation, in order to make a connection between women who come from very different places within the

¹ See Adriana Cavarero (1997 [2000]) *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul A. Kottmann. London and New York: Routledge, p. 39.

Black diaspora. The most radical vision is held by H. D.: because the same unconscious myths and dream symbols are shared by everyone, everywhere (a belief taken from Freud's theory that the most ancient symbols are a genetic residue that stems from the earliest ages of humankind) it is possible for humanity to overcome all cultural differences and live together in peace and harmony: a utopian vision to counter the devastating effects the First World War had on the narrator.

A special use made of the myth as force of connection is that of connection between the autobiographer and her mother. In most cases, this means also 'resurrecting' the mother, because she is already dead at the beginning of the narrative. For H. D.'s and Maureen Duffy's narrators, the search for and resurrection of the childhood self is explicitly connected to the attempt to return to the mother: 'My mother was dead. I was dead, that is, the child that called her mamma was dead.' (*Tribute to Freud*, p. 17) For 'Paddy', it is the death of the mother that fuels the desire to remember everything 'just as it was'; however, she must recognise that this is not possible, she is left only with either subjective and incomplete memories, or family stories told to her by others.

On the contrary, for Christa Wolf's narrator, the attempt to excavate her childhood self implies a betrayal of her mother, because she must accuse her mother of being a recognisable example of the mothers of her time: on the one hand, she conformed to the Nazi regime and repressed her knowledge of the atrocities committed there. On the other hand, she is blamed for

instilling a pervasive feeling of guilt in the child by making her repress her natural aggressive and sexual impulses. This betrayal of the mother is still accompanied by the haunting feeling of guilt: the narrator is plagued by dreams that show her own manuscript empty but for the word MOTHER (p. 16) or the amputation of her writing hand that has been raised against the mother (p. 33).

Nevertheless, the possibility of returning to the mother, in spite of these difficulties, is opened up by mythmaking and storytelling. It is in storytelling that the maternal heritage is preserved, and the autobiographers perpetuate it by including their mother's stories into their own narratives: Maxine Hong Kingston develops the fantasy of Fa Mu Lan from a ballad sung by her mother, and ends her book with an interweaving of her mother's story with her own. Audre Lorde traces her love for words and poetry back to her mother's colourful language and develops her utopian island of Carriacou from the 'home' she knew about 'out of my mother's mouth.' (*Zami*, p. 4) For Maureen Duffy's narrator, the stories told by her mother form the 'real', mythical past.

However, they all cannot but fix their mother's rich oral storytelling into one or several written versions; and they tell stories that run against the traditions instilled by their mothers: for example, Kingston's narrator discloses the story of No Name Woman, even though her mother had warned her never to repeat it and she thought that mentioning the word 'aunt' could do mysterious damage to her father (p. 22), while Lorde

includes stories that tell of her beginning fascination with other female bodies. Again, even though the mother provides the role model of strength and resilience, in the end, the daughter must find her own way, and even use the strength inherited from her to rebel against her.²

It is, again, psychoanalysis that provides a link between myth and the return to the mother by claiming that there is a time of primal closeness to the mother in the pre-oedipal phase. On the other hand, psychoanalysis offers, through the transference and unearthing early memories, a possibility of temporarily returning to this pre-oedipal time before mother and daughter are divided by the patriarchal Law of the Father. H. D., again, claims that Freud brought her 'home' to her mother. She develops a link between this early closeness and mythical time. Following Freud in connecting the pre-oedipal phase to the pre-Hellenic Mycenaean or Minoan matriarchies, she can return to this pre-historic time in her dreams and fantasies. Moreover, by connecting 'Hellas' to her mother Helen, it becomes possible to return to her when travelling to Greece, or using 'Hellas' as a source of poetic inspiration. Because the mother is part of the primal, mythical strata in her own psyche, she can also re-connect herself to her mother in her dreams.

This means, of course, a revision of the past as well, or a privileging of a few rare moments of closeness: Virginia Woolf's first memory of sitting on her mother's lap has been read as an attempt to recuperate the pre-oedipal

² See Lynn Z. Bloom (1980) 'Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter-Relationships in Women's Autobiographies.' In: Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, eds. *The Lost*

closeness between mother and daughter. For those autobiographers who grew up to become lesbians, the close connection to the mother is again crucial: both Maureen Duffy's 'Paddy' and Dorothy Allison's narrator thrive on their mother's love which instils in them the courage to become 'different'. In 'Paddy's' case, it is the mother's illness that allows her to develop her own strengths and chivalric protectiveness. Audre Lorde traces her own lesbianism back to a strong and sensual relationship to her mother and from there to a Caribbean tradition of woman-bonding where it is said that 'the desire to lie with women is a drive from the mother's blood.' (*Zami*, p. 224) H. D.'s narrator succeeds in revising the relationship with her mother (who liked her brother better and sacrificed herself for the males in the family) by replacing the mother with later lovers and the maternal 'Freud'. However, the expression of lesbian desire as desire for the mother is always an effect of 'deferred action': the love for women the present narrator feels is projected backwards onto memories of the mother-child relationship; the result is a 'fantasmatic, dynamic triangulation of the subject's desire between the other woman, the mother's body, and her own.'³

For those autobiographers whose mothers lived at the place of origin before migrating to the US, they become inextricably connected to it: they enforce the traditions that keep the 'old country' alive, and they tell the stories that recreate it in their daughters' minds. Thus, they become the bridge that

Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature. New York: Ungar, pp. 291-305.

connects the autobiographers to the magical place of 'home', and thus, they become almost mythical figures themselves. On the other hand, they are entangled in the patriarchal systems that govern both the 'old' and the 'new' country; often, their power depends on their participation in the patriarchal family by discriminating against their daughters. It is, again, through mythmaking and storytelling that the love and power of the mothers is nevertheless celebrated. Although they are always already lost to their adult daughters, they leave a lasting trace in their life; they are the single most important point of origin.

Although, as a narrative, autobiography seems to be tied to a clear time structure, with a beginning, middle, and an end, origin myths and stories, as well as the intricacies of memory, do much to disrupt this narrative. First and foremost, psychoanalysis has contested the linearity of the life story. The unconscious is atemporal and at the same time a repository for the past: it contains archaeological layers of memories developed over time that are preserved, not only in their original form, but also in the form in which they were later remembered, and with all the meanings which they have subsequently accrued. Because of this, it becomes possible to reverse the flow of time: later developments are projected back onto childhood memories and childhood emotions can, as re-enactments in transference, seep through into the present. Thus, autobiographical memory changes its shape; it is no longer seen horizontally, as an avenue, stretching back to

³ Teresa De Lauretis (1994) *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 171.

childhood and the nursery, but vertically, as a multilayered depth into which the autobiographer must dig for traces of the past, a view which ties in with a theory of time developed by phenomenological philosophy.

Following Ricoeur's theories, I have divided possible viewpoints on the past in those of the past as 'the same' as the present (and therefore the movement from past to present self is unproblematic); the past as 'Other' than the present (and thus the past self is seen as utterly Other as well) and the past as analogous or 'like' the present (in that case, the past self leaves traces in the present self that can be discovered). Mostly, the autobiographers follow the third way, probing their memories and present selves for traces of the past or looking for the ways in which present and past interact and shape each other. *A Sketch of the Past* particularly ponders these connections: on the one hand, the past can become more 'real' than the present that is seen through the memory of the past. On the other hand, the present is enriched by the remembered past: 'the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so closely that you can feel nothing else.' (*A Sketch of the Past*, p. 98)

On the other hand, the past can also be seen as utterly Other to the present. In the positive sense, it can be the utopian past that is different from a present that needs to be changed. Thus, it participates in the mythical time that is opened up by the origin myth, rooting the mythmaker in a time before 'the Fall', before things have changed irretrievably towards the dystopian present. Myths of origin can then project an imaginary past into the future,

as the 'not yet of the never has been'. Autobiographical memory, then, is not a repository for facts, but a space to construct alternative pasts as 'imaginings of a different time' especially for women writers. Maureen Duffy, Audre Lorde and H. D. draw on decidedly utopian traditions in order to construct these mythical pasts that feed into a different future: that of abundance wrested from scarcity and that of the island community that lives in peace and harmony, where women can be close to each other and to nature. These different pasts are, again, seen as shared with an imaginary community of equals; again, it is myth that provides the link between the personal past, the personal story and the utopian vision.

On the other hand, the past as other can take the shape of the haunting past. While in most of the autobiographies the typical pattern seems to be a split from the past that was overcome with returning to and recovering a (different) past, for some of the autobiographers the 'rift that goes through time' becomes almost unbreachable. This, again, results in two possible outcomes: on the one hand, the autobiographer can be bound to the past in a hopeless nostalgia, a yearning for the past as a lost paradise that can never be fulfilled. This nostalgia can also take the shape of a desire to return to her childhood self that is enclosed in the past, and rescue it. On the other hand, she could be haunted by the past that she tried to escape and cut herself off from (or was cut off forcibly). Then, the autobiographical narrative could split in two, with the autobiographer imagining what could have been had she not gone away or got away, creating a ghostly *doppelgänger* that haunts the narrator's dreams or imagination. The past is at the same time elusive

and overwhelming, threatening to engulf the present. The past self is always part of the present self; yet it is, at the same time, utterly Other and inexplicable. Present and past interact and mingle constantly, and every attempt of 'getting rid' of the past is thwarted, as is every attempt of fully understanding a present self by analysing memories.

In exploring the 'first memory' episodes within the autobiographies, I have attempted to link the concept of the past as same and Other with the autobiographical self. Memories seem to follow a similar pattern: singular, 'snapshot' memories were frozen in time and cut off from the self that experienced the remembered events; a narrative was needed to connect them or create an overlay between them and thus to create an (albeit sometimes complex and fragmented) autobiographical self: the figure of the storyteller, 'the person who judges the voices and tells the stories' (*Lost in Translation*, p. 272). However, the past can become a positive or even magical Other that does not fragment the self but transcends it. This can happen through narrative as well, a narrative that connects the autobiographical self with her mother, or whole generations of ancestresses. This narrative fuses the story of the self with the stories told by other people, and speaks of the connectedness between them. Moreover, the 'super-memories' transcend both self and time: on the one hand, they overwhelm the self, dissolving it in terror or ecstasy, on the other hand, they re-affirm it: super-memories dissolve the time barrier between present and past self and bring the self into mythical time, where it is eternally present to itself in the 'I am'. On the

other hand, this is shown to be an effect of the act of writing or performance that created this eternal, mythical present.

I have used the concept of autobiography as myth of origin in order to show the ways in which, in women writers' autobiographies, self and other are inextricably entwined. This does not take the form of a female subjectivity that is somehow more fluid, more based on connection with an Other than the male. On the one hand, the origin is, in autobiographical writing by both men and women, seen as the core of the self, but only accessible in the stories of others. On the other hand, women writers deliberately connect themselves to the stories of mothers, claiming a female heritage to counter the tradition of fathers. Some see the imaginary return to the mother as origin as the source of their desire for other women, and critique the way in which Freudian psychoanalysis depicts this return to the origins as a male prerogative.

I have begun by exploring embodied selfhood, the narratives of 'becoming a woman' told by the autobiographers. In this case, it is in the experience of being embodied that 'self' and 'Other' interact: the body is seen as determined by, even incorporating, restrictive discourses of femininity. This is possible to the extent that the body is seen as a traitor, turning on the self, thus becoming in itself 'Other' to the autobiographical self. On the other hand, the body is capable of 'talking back' and disrupt these discourses. On yet another level, cultural clashes expose the seeming naturalness of femininity as a conscious effort, a way of 'doing femininity'; in adopting

different techniques of the body, the autobiographers could become caught between different ways of doing femininity, in conflict either with their family's cultural background or their new cultural context; however, this in-between situation also freed them to re-invent themselves. The body is seen as at the same time a 'deep core' of the self and source of the sexual impulses that define the self. On the other hand, it is a repository for personal history (most traumatically, a history of being sexually abused) and bears the effects of discourses of femininity which attempt to stifle the body's capacity for 'talking back'. The autobiographers employ a 'double discourse' of the body that views it as at the same time pre-discursive and shaped by discourses of race, class, and sexuality.

In describing the origins as at the same time the core of the self and utterly Other, I believe that I have followed a strategy employed within the autobiographies: I have contested those theories of autobiography that see it as re-enforcing a coherent selfhood that is an illusion, or upholding a basically masculine subjectivity that cuts itself off from all others. Rather, I have attempted to show that the autobiographical project in itself is biased against this. In the autobiographies, the narrative of the self is not a simple, chronological one, but it is complex and sometimes contradictory, because the self is constructed by a coherent narrative as well as the remembered moments that disrupt and/or transcend the narrative. The narrativisation of memory, in turn, makes it possible to link the self to others. Moreover, a split from the origins, caused by forced migration, the desire to escape a traumatic childhood or a stifling family home, or simply by growing up and

going away, causes the 'Othering' process that I have described above, either the split self that endlessly attempts to reconnect with its severed other parts, or the nostalgia that yearns for the lost paradise.

However, I believe that this connection between self and Other flows in two directions: looked at from the point of view that sees the self as coherent and autobiography as reinforcing this coherent selfhood, it reveals how the origins are always Other, how the self is made Other by the process of remembering, traumatic experiences, or the first understanding of its own contingency and mortality. From this angle, the imperative is (to paraphrase Freud) 'where self was, Other shall be'. On the other hand, origin myths and stories can also be a form of connections: between the self and Other, other people, imagined communities, mothers and daughters, and the place of origin and the diaspora. The self is '*flowing in either direction as needed*' (*Zami*, xvi); backwards, in a return to childhood, the mythical age, a matrilineal heritage, and forwards, to connect to a different, utopian future. Seen from this perspective, the imperative should be 'where Other was, self shall be.' Throughout the thesis, I have addressed the problems of selfhood within the autobiographical origin myth, in a way that sees selfhood as always embroiled with Otherness. The theorists I have discussed in Chapter Two describe women's autobiography as characterised by a close connection of selfhood and Otherness, but in very different ways. There are those that see women's autobiographies as emphasising relations over autonomy, the Other the autobiographers relate to as always other people: significant others, families, the feminist community. However, there are also

theorists who see women's autobiography as emphasising a fundamental Otherness encountered in the process of writing, where the Other is both implicated in the self of the writer and in the autobiographical self created in the text.

What I have attempted in this thesis is a theoretical approach that, on the one hand, perceives Otherness always to be implicated in the narrator's origins (in childhood, memory, the past, the home, the body), but, on the other hand, takes to heart Adriana Cavarero's warning that 'by continuing to transport the category of alterity into the intimacy of the self, contemporary philosophy produces the inevitable consequence of impeding any serious naming of the other in so far as he/she is *an* other.'⁴ Thus, I do not see this close connection between selfhood and Otherness as a sign of an essential fragmentation of the subject or a sign of fluid female subjectivity. What is, I believe, unique about women's autobiographies is not the fact that the self is shown to be embroiled with Otherness or that these connections are made, but the precise ways in which the autobiographers explain what it can mean to be a woman or a girl in a precisely located point in time and space (say, as a Jewish girl in postwar Poland), and the ways in which the protagonist experiences, negotiates or resists sometimes contradictory and confusing ideas of femininity. In all the autobiographies I have discussed, the autobiographical selves are both mythical or connected to mythical pasts and homelands *and* precisely located in history.

⁴ Adriana Cavarero (2000) *Relating Narratives*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 43

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